

Interview with Poet Kevin Cutrer

Biography

Kevin Cutrer was born in the American South, has lived in South America, and now resides in the southernmost neighborhood of Boston. His first poetry collection, *Lord's Own Anointed*, appeared from *Dos Madres Press* (<https://www.dosmadres.com>) in 2015. His run-ins with higher education have occurred at Southeastern Louisiana University and Emerson College. *The Hudson Review*, *The Dark Horse*, *The Raintown Review*, and many other journals have published his poems, and he has been a featured reader for the reading series Mr. Hip Presents, U35, and Carmine Street Metrics.

Interview

Louisiana Libraries: Growing up in the small but well known Louisiana community of Kentwood, which was made somewhat famous by Britney Spears, has served you well as a poet. You keep returning to it, don't you? Why?

Kevin Cutrer: My main reason for returning is to spend time with my family. They all live on the same road, within a mile of my parents' house. When I was younger and living in Kentwood, I felt an irresistible urge to see the world outside my hometown. Now, having made a home in the far-away-out-there, I feel a similar urge to continually return to my first people. This mainly owes to the knowledge that we only have so much time on earth, and it would be all too easy to let years slip without seeing everyone I love back home.

And the food, of course. Every time I visit, I put on five pounds.

Louisiana Libraries: Your family runs a meat market. The poems speak of rural life with neither sentimentality nor cynicism. Is there a connection between the hard work of agriculture and looking at the world straight?

Kevin Cutrer: Before I answer that, I have to come clean about something: I don't know a thing about the kind of hard work my father and brothers do. Which is not to say that I am not a hard worker, but that I've worked behind a desk all my life. I come home every weekday mentally exhausted. But there is a great divide between updating spreadsheets all day and working a bone saw. I have never worked a job where one wrong move can cost me my hand or my life. If there is any connection between that kind of work and "looking at the world straight," it comes from the knowledge of life and death, the cycle of the seasons, that is not divorced from the day's labors. But to insist upon this connection would be to romanticize the personage of the agricultural worker.

I'd also like to question this phrase, "looking at the world straight." As a poet, that's really not my job. In most of my poems, I am writing as someone else—I'm pretending to be a butcher, or a middle-aged woman on a dairy farm, or a high school kid remembering the time she played Mary in the Easter play. My goal in each of these poems has been to arrive at some point of agreement with the character in the poem, who is as different from me as my imagination can manage. In one of my poems, a man has just witnessed his brother kill the neighbor's dog with a shotgun for no reason. He knows that as a Christian, if not as a brother, he will have to continue to love him even though he has committed a heinous act. This leads him to reach the conclusion that "forgiveness is a lie we tell." Now, I don't personally believe that forgiveness is a lie. But I do think there is a psychological truth to that statement—in order to forgive someone, you have to put aside your hurt and resentment, and that can feel like lying to yourself. And I think the speaker of my poem sees it this way, too, because he also says, "Sometimes there ain't no other way/ to live, but live by lies we tell." The man is struggling to go on living with knowledge that is incomprehensible and vile. (Isn't that, after all, what we are all trying to do?) Now, is my character looking at the world straight? He is definitely facing the world head on, but in order to go on living he has do

to some thinking that is not very straightforward.

Louisiana Libraries: After graduating from college at Southeastern in Hammond—where you worked in the campus library—you moved to Boston, then Brazil. You're back in Boston now. You've been gone for 10 years. How have the cities captured your imagination?

Kevin Cutrer: I finished growing up in Boston. I moved here when I was 22, on New Year's Day, 2006. I stayed in a friend's basement in Walpole, a suburb on the commuter rail line into the city, for a couple of months until I found steady work and a place to live near Cambridge. I met my wife, Cris, in Harvard Square that same year, through a friend of mine who was displaced by Katrina and was taking classes at Harvard Extension School. I love the mixture of architectural styles here, the bookstores and libraries, and the many friends and colleagues I have met. The McKim building of the main branch of the Boston Public Library, besides having a world-renowned collection of rare books and artwork, is a marvelous example of late nineteenth century *Beaux-Arts* architecture. My office is located around the corner from this building, and I often walk through the main entryway and stand in awe. Then I make my way to the stacks and get lost in poems.

The landscape of northeastern Brazil, where I lived for two years with Cris (who was born and raised there), was an inspiration—lots of rolling hills and the sparse vegetation of a semi-arid region. We lived in Garanhuns, at a considerably higher elevation than many of the surrounding cities, and the great cumulus clouds that migrated across the unbelievably blue sky affected me deeply. I have long been a cloud gazer, and nothing in my life surpasses the clouds of Garanhuns. Through Cris, my family has grown tremendously, and I suffer *saudades* (a word that we might feebly translate as nostalgia) for all of my friends and former students there. I could go on and on about the beauty of the Portuguese language (which I am still studying and struggling to master). I have learned a lot through listening to Brazilian music, from Tom Jobim to Caetano Veloso to *Os Mutantes* to *Cordel do Fogo Encantado*, all of

which has blessed my life incalculably.

Louisiana Libraries: *Lord's Own Anointed*, your first collection of poems, was recently published by Dos Madres Press. It includes work published in many of the best literary journals. What has kept you on task over the years?

Kevin Cutrer: I have often said that you have to be like Don Quixote to be a poet. You have to get on your old beaten horse, day in and day out, and attack those windmills. You have to be out of your mind.

Kidding aside, the friends I have made through poetry have kept me going. There is no other reward in the life of a poet. Sure, they still award Pulitzer prizes for poetry collections, and a range of lucrative grants and fellowships keep a lot of folks occupied with their CVs. But you can't count on getting that kind of attention for your work, and being lauded by the establishment does not necessarily mean that your work merits the attention and praise. At the end of the day, it is only about the love of the art, and the friendships you make with the other poor fools who share the love.

Louisiana Libraries: No doubt religion plays a major role in the poetry collection. In many ways the religious images are critical yet honoring religion's role in the piney woods of southeast Louisiana. How does faith or religious culture enhance the poetry?

Kevin Cutrer: It's been almost ten years since I last attended a church service. I was raised in the Southern Baptist church, and I spent a good part of my life wrestling with its dogma, with its emphasis on hellfire and brimstone that I simply cannot accept as the dominant message of Christ's teachings. I also can't accept any of the anti-science positions of many Christian denominations. So, religious belief has always been a struggle for me, and I hope that it comes across as a struggle for the characters in my poems who are devout believers coming to terms with keeping faith in a faithless world.

This struggle also represents a key element of my craft. By trying to write from the point of view of characters who are more religious than me, I am attempting to embody what John Keats calls “negative capability,” an enlarging of the imagination to include opposing ideas without rushing to form a position regarding them. I am paraphrasing Keats here, and I may be misinterpreting him, but all the same this has been one of the chief guiding principles of my writing.

Louisiana Libraries: Illustrations were done by a friend from your hometown, Rob Fairburn. He really seemed to understand the work. And he has plenty of talent—like a poet with a drawing pencil. What led you to collaborating with Fairburn, and what was the process like?

Kevin Cutrer: Rob and I met while students at Southeastern, and have stayed in touch ever since. I’ve long been an admirer of his work, and in the years I was writing the poems for this collection I often brought up the idea of working together on a project like this. When *Dos Madres* accepted the manuscript, I reached out to Rob, and within a couple of weeks he had finished all of the drawings.

The process was simple. It mostly took place via text messaging. We texted each other about our vision for the drawings, and then Rob got to work. When he finished a drawing, he texted a photo of it and asked my opinion. I made a few suggestions here and there, and thumbed down one or two pictures, but for the most part it all came together rather quickly and effortlessly. This owes, I think, to Rob’s intimate knowledge of our hometown. He has told me that he sees the people in my poems very clearly—which makes me rather proud, since I made them all up for the most part.

I love working with artists in other disciplines. As an undergrad, I collaborated with my friend Stephen Suber, who is composer-in-residence at Southeastern, on a song cycle. Art, to me, is about bringing people together, and these kinds of collaborations are one way of doing that.

Louisiana Libraries: Who are the poets that mean the most to you?

Kevin Cutrer: It’s easier for me to list poems rather than poets. Five of my all time favorites, just off the top of my head: “Four Quartets” by T.S. Eliot, “Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden, “Sailing to Byzantium” by W.B. Yeats, “Greed” by Ai, and “Crusoe in England” by Elizabeth Bishop. I realize that I didn’t name one poem by Robert Frost. That must be because I have endeavored for the greater part of a decade to shake his considerable influence. I read Frost’s poems to distraction, particularly the dramatic poems in *North of Boston*, *Mountain Interval*, and *New Hampshire*.

Louisiana Libraries: What are you writing now? Will the work be set in Louisiana?

Kevin Cutrer: I always have more than one project going on. Even when writing *Lord’s Own Anointed* I was drafting poems that I knew would go into another collection. I suppose my primary project at the moment is a collection of poems drawn from my memories of Brazil. But from time to time I do draft a piece set in Louisiana—how could I not? Louisiana is an inexhaustible wellspring for poems.

Louisiana Libraries: Can poetry—or art—save the world?

Kevin Cutrer: I can’t speak for the world at large, but I can say that literature and the arts have certainly saved *my* world.