

## **insider report**

# Robert McBrearty: Succeeding in the short story form

"I try to write stories that are funny, touching, and offer some insight into life and what it means to be human." In talking with short story writer Robert McBrearty, one gets the distinct impression that to McBrearty realizing this personal goal, more than anything else, means success.

McBrearty's recent collection of short fiction, *A Night at the Y* (John Daniel & Co., 1999), is filled with characters whose creation stands as evidence of the author's goal: the stories revolve around their characters' search for meaning. "I think the lack of a sense of purpose actually is one of the themes that runs through the collection—however, not in a negative sort of way. Usually there's a search going on, a search for that purpose, and the characters make some progress along the way with that search," says McBrearty.

McBrearty freely admits that the searches his characters are involved in are not merely the fruit of his imagination, but are often based on his own human experiences. "Probably my own search is reflected in the stories. A lot of times, the viewpoint character—the 'I' character—is somewhat like myself, or maybe I'll draw on different aspects of myself."

For a first collection, *A Night at the Y* has drawn some encouraging critical attention. "Every now and then one encounters a book whose every sentence is so finely crafted as to approach perfection. (This) is such a book," wrote a critic for the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*. And a critic from *The Chicago Tribune* wrote, "What threads through McBrearty's warm and engaging collection is a humaneness toward his characters, and a gentle, sad irony that pervades their world views."

### **Translating life into art**

The short stories in *A Night at the Y* are all written from the point of view of ordinary men making their way through a complex world. "I guess I feel more comfortable writing from a male point of view," McBrearty says. "I feel it's what I know, so it's the place I usually come from." It is often the ordinariness of these characters that makes their respective plights so accessible to readers: the night clerk who re-evaluates his definition of a hero, the husband and new father for whom house shopping becomes a flight for freedom, the dishwasher whose job parallels his relationship woes. For McBrearty, the characters represent a payoff of sorts for years of "frustrating, demoralizing experiences," he says. "A lot of the stories came out of various drudge kinds of jobs I worked—dishwashing, night clerk, construction. There was a period of one job after another, mostly fairly unrewarding stuff. To some extent, writing was the thing that kept me going. Those kinds of jobs, while painful, provide some great experiences



**Robert McBrearty**

to write about." McBrearty also points to his life as a family man, with a marriage and children, as a source of inspiration for his writing. "Ordinary life has much richness in it if one is alert and perceptive," he says.

### **McBrearty's writing roots**

The inception of McBrearty's writing career can be traced back to a high school experience which he remembers as a defining moment. "In my freshman year of high school, our English teacher asked us to write a short story at the end of the year, and I worked on it for a couple of weeks and just discovered it was something that I really liked doing," he says. "I guess it was one of the first things in school that I got really excited about, and I sort of knew right then what I wanted to do with my life."

After high school, McBrearty attended the University of Texas, then went to study creative writing at the University of Guanajuato in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico (the town where he set the collection's title story), and stayed on for a few years to teach English. He is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and has received numerous awards for his fiction, such as a Pushcart Prize for his first published piece, "The Dishwasher," and fellowships to the MacDowell Colony and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He has taught writing part-time at the University of Colorado for the past ten years.

However, before the awards and well-received collection, McBrearty discovered the invaluable resource provided by small press publications to beginning writers, especially writers of short stories, a form often singled out as dying due to dwindling venues for publication. "I think the short story form is still going quite strong. Maybe not too much in a commercial sense—that is, it's difficult to make money at it—but I think it's going very strong, primarily in the small presses. You can use those small press publications in a lot of ways—help to get jobs, fellowships—so even though they are not that rewarding financially right up front, there are a lot of kind of spin-offs to them."

McBrearty also points to the networking opportunities that small press publications provide for writers. "I think establishing contacts, a network of writers and editors that you know, is very important. That starts slowly, but as you go on with your writing career, it expands so you know other writers and the editors of various magazines, if not personally, then at least through letters and phone calls." He mentions *The Missouri Review* and *The Green Hills Literary Lantern* as two magazines in which he has had the fortune of having repeat stories appear. Making use of small press publications requires one to have persistence, however, and McBrearty is quick to warn against expecting overnight success.

### **On discipline and finding your voice**

McBrearty stresses that being able to develop a writing routine has been key to the success of his career. "I think especially when writers are getting going, it's really important to develop some good work habits, try to get into a routine. I wouldn't be inflexible about it—that is, I think writers can really drive themselves crazy if they have this inflexible schedule that they can never vary from. You should have some days when you let yourself rest, but in general I think you need some real good work habits, especially when you're starting out. If beginning writers never really get a good work habit going, then it's very hard to accomplish anything." His personal routine involves writing in the morning, sometimes getting up as early as five and

working until seven, "partly because I have children and the rest of the household doesn't get up until about seven, so I can get quiet time," and sometimes allowing himself to shift to writing for two to three hours later in the morning. "I set up various routines, and I'll go along with one routine for a while until it seems to need some change. I'm always experimenting."

Another lesson McBrearty learned early is that writers should be willing to experiment with their work in order to find where their strengths lie. "In my own case, when I was in college, I was writing kind of somber, serious stories—the situations all seemed bleak, the characters seemed bleak. One of my creative writing teachers said, 'Why don't you try writing some comedy?' And I did. My next story had some comedy in it, and I figured out that was one of my real strengths. So I think sometimes finding your strengths and what kind of writer you are can make a huge difference."

With reviewers quick to praise his mastery of wit and compassionate rendering of characters, one may feel that McBrearty has, indeed, realized his personal goal with the stories in *A Night at the Y*. And with a novel and second short story collection forthcoming, as well as numerous teaching opportunities and readings being offered him, McBrearty has found that his determination has garnered success well beyond his expectations.

—Rodney A. Wilson