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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS MARK SCHIMMOELLER, AUTHOR OF "SLOWSPOKE"

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Mark Schimmoeller

AM: Mark, I'm excited about this interview because I'd like to say I know someone who made a cross-country trip on a unicycle. Not many people can claim that—probably just the people who know you. Why in the world did you undertake this journey?

MS: I'm thrilled that you know a cross-country unicycle traveler—and a bit envious, for I've yet to meet one (or even hear about one) since I took my journey in 1992. I suspect our numbers are on the low side, though sometimes I entertain myself by seeing them often, in someone, say, picking up a violin for the first time, or an elderly person experimenting with a walker, in people who apparently aren't getting anywhere but who are nonetheless absorbed in a task. Why did I take off on a unicycle? Because I wanted to give myself all the time in the world. As I say in the book, I wanted to squander time (as most people would view unicycling) in order to demonstrate its availability.

AM: Your book about this journey is *Slowspoke*, with the subtitle *A Unicyclist's Guide to America*. For those who haven't read the book, what do you mean by "slowspoke"?

MS: With this title I'm simply trying to be descriptive of a spoke on a unicycle wheel, which is never spun around so quickly that it ceases to move. There are a lot of moving parts in the riding of a unicycle, and a unicyclist, consciously or unconsciously, is aware of them all. As a consequence of technological advances over the last couple of centuries, we as humans have become less aware of the velocities of things that support us. My journey was in some ways a response to this. I didn't want my vehicle to be incomprehensible. I wanted to see its spokes and to feel my connection to the planet.

AM: Janisse Ray says in the Foreword that your narrative "offers a love-filled and hard-hitting philosophy that asks us to search our souls for more thoughtful, conscientious, and sustainable ways of living." I'm not asking you to forfeit your humility, but what do you think she meant by this?

MS: Janisse is very kind, but my intent is not an activist one with respect to the reader—it is merely to communicate an impulse that I had to playfully slow. That impulse led me often to feel vulnerable and dismissed by our society, but also open to my environs, swayed by them and happy. If I've

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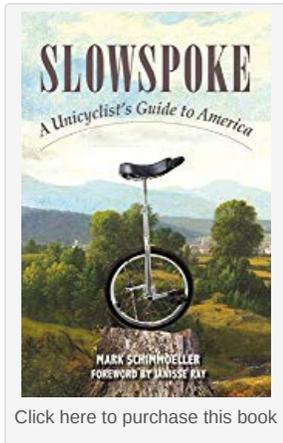


communicated that complexity to unicycle travel (which would be true of any endeavor that doesn't compute but that engages our minds, spirits, and bodies), then I would be delighted.

AM: Back when I was a freshman in college, my entire incoming class was assigned to read Ray's memoir *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. She's a talented writer. Having her praise must mean a lot. Tell me, what writers have most influenced you? While I'm at it, did you ever think of yourself as a Jack Kerouac from a later generation—perhaps a more creative or at least more athletic version of him? Your epigraph quotes Howard Zinn, and I can see that connection too.

MS: Yes, I am thrilled. *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* is a lovely, poignant memoir. As for Kerouac, I think he has always been nearby as I've worked on *Slowspoke*. I've also been influenced by *Blue Highways* and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and even, for a comic look at progress, *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Other writers who have had a big effect on me are William Morris, Rachel Carson, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Henry David Thoreau, and Edward Abbey.

I'm also an avid reader of contemporary literary novels—I'm drawn to sentences that hold as much mystery as definition, that ask me to be both reader and creator as the story unfolds.



AM: I hope you won't mind a compliment: your prose is stunning. It really is. I've tried to find the perfect passage to ask you about, but there are just too many to choose from. It's not just the stories that are poignant, but the way you're alert to things like motion, sound, place, space. Do you think you're more attentive to these things in your everyday life than other people are in their own lives? I have in mind a talk Truman Capote once gave at Auburn University. He said he believes writers are more observant and sensitive to the details around them.

MS: Thank you. If there's good prose in *Slowspoke*, it is the result of working on this book for twenty years. The sentences got better, at least most of them. This is something I choose to believe. I love

revision, but it was also a good feeling to read my final draft in 2014 (the book took its form over the course of four drafts, the first two written on a manual typewriter) and to realize that it really was the final draft. Sometimes I wonder how the writing process would have been different if I had traveled across the country on a bicycle, or, heaven forbid, something motorized.

AM: You write this in the book, speaking about your unicycle hanging among the tools in your shed: "I'm occasionally disoriented by its lack of motion, and when people ask me if I'm ever going to travel on it again, I don't have a good answer." If I were to ask you that very question today, would you have a good answer?

MS: I think I would say that there's a time and a place for a journey and that it's probably better to start new ones than retake the old. Currently I'm working on a novel, living with my wife Jennifer in the woods, in an off-the-grid cabin we built with our own hands. I'm pretty much not going anywhere, which reminds me, actually, of unicycling. And, really, noticing the seasons pass by—the field on its way to a woods, our apple trees acquiring the thick trunks and limbs that you see in established orchards—gives us, at this point, the journey we're most interested in.

AM: Thank you very much for your time. If you're ever wheeling your way down to Alabama, make sure to look me up.

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