

5-4-2017

Henry Hughes Interview 2017

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Recommended Citation

Henry Hughes, interviewed by Sarah Erickson, Brandon Meredith, Victoria Webb and Joey Donohue, Western Oregon University Oral Histories, Hamersly Library, Western Oregon University, May 4, 2017.

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Dr. Henry Hughes, Department of English, Western Oregon University



HH: Dr. Henry Hughes

JD: Joey Donohue

BM: Brandon Meredith

SE: Sarah Erickson

VW: Victoria Webb

Interview and Transcription by: Joey Donohue, Brandon Meredith, Sarah Erickson, and Victoria Webb, 2017

Interview with Dr. Henry Hughes

2017 May 4

HST 408

JD: The date is May 4th, 2017. The interviewee is Dr. Henry Hughes, the interviewers are Joey Donohue, Victoria Webb, Brandon Meredith and Sarah Erickson. Dr. Hughes, how are you today?

HH: I am very well, thank you. I'm excited to be here.

JD: Good, good. When did you start working at Western?

HH: I started in the fall of 2002, so I've been here fifteen years. It's been good, good ride so far.

JD: What were the circumstances that lead you to come to Western?

HH: Well, like many of the people that teach here, I'm an academic, and so I did a PHD. My last degree was in American Literature and when you're in your last year you go out for interviews, you go on the job market and it was a good year. You know the cycle goes up and down, some

years there aren't that many jobs. I got lucky it was a good year so I got a lot of interest and I did a bunch of interviews at something called the MLA conference, the Modern Language Association conference, you go to, it was in New Orleans. It was great, little bit of a party town and you go to different rooms and they interview you and Western Oregon interviewed me and then you get asked back, for like, if they like you, for a campus visit, for the final interview. So I had a few of those and I came here and I really loved Western Oregon. It was a beautiful place, I'm a big outdoorsman. I love fishing. I enjoy wine and beer and I don't mind rain, so this was a good fit for me. And I really liked the people, so I took the job and actually drove cross country that summer from New York, where I grew up, in an old car, a 20-year-old Buick. I stopped along the way, visited people, did some fishing, and showed up here in Monmouth.

JD: Have you had any other positions here at Western?

HH: Well primarily I'm a teacher, and I consider myself a writer. So I love to teach writing. So I think it's good to practice what you preach. So I do a lot of writing, I've published a few books and articles since I've been here and then like all of us, we get involved in other things. Like I'm involved in judging contests or various committees. But primarily, I really see myself as a teacher and you know mentor to young writers who are interested in literature as well you know, and I think that's my main role. Good questions, thank you Joey.

BM: What is the basis for your job at Western?

HH: Yeah I like that, the basis, man my goodness I don't know I guess the history of institutions in the world, that we have colleges of higher learning. And that question is actually debated once in a while, how important is literature and writing? I think it's very important, like philosophy, or history, or art - someone who's trained in my field and I teach people like you, and I participate in my field. So that's important thing for a professor, little different from maybe the average high

school teacher. It's important to go to conferences in your field, to keep up to date with things in your field so I write book reviews. For example, I'm writing one right now, and that really forces me to kinda think "alright what is happening in contemporary poetry, what do I have to say about this book" you basically get into a conversation about what's happening right now in your field. Like for me and literature, and I really like that, I really like being active in that. I do a lot of outreach too, I do a lot of readings around the state, mostly free, sometimes they'll give you like fifty bucks or you know whatever some flowers or something. But I do a lot of that, go to schools, go to libraries, go to community centers, do a free workshop and do a reading and I enjoy that a lot too, that's interesting work. Getting people turned on to literature hopefully.

BM: You went into this quite a bit, but are there any other examples of the kinds of work you do?

HH: Well, again being a professor can mean many things, some people are really involved in what they call "service" and running, helping to run the university. All these various systems that take place, how is curriculum formed, how is the budget managed, and I do less of that. That interests me less. I like to be right at the interface of student-teacher where the rubber hits the road and so I am more of a teacher, again a writer, someone that carries literature out to the public so I am not as service oriented but I know a lot of people feel strongly about that - we get involved in some things, I'm involved in the union and I'll send an inflammatory email once in a while and get people fired up so I enjoy that. Even a little bit of role of the jester on campus, as a poet I feel once in a while I just have to call something out and sometimes I get in a little bit of trouble for it but I enjoy doing that I think it's kind of like a cartoonist, a political cartoonist or someone who writes an editorial to a newspaper, I like doing that. If I see something that's really messed up I try to expose it.

BM: What's a typical work day like for you?

HH: Oh, I love that question. Ok today is a good example, I like to get up at 5 o'clock and I get to this office at 5:30 [AM]. And I write until about 8 [AM] door closed, have my coffee have a little breakfast and then I'm in my sweats and my hair isn't combed and I kinda sneak out. Maybe I say "Hi, hi" and people are just starting to arrive, I go home and get myself ready for the work day. Get dressed, get cleaned up and then come back and typical teach one or two classes, and all of us in the English department teach three classes a term. That's a heavier load than like OSU [Oregon State University] or U of O [University of Oregon] we're more of a teaching college than a research college. So teach my classes, have office hours, this is office hour welcome, there may be a division meeting, department meeting, there is always some service, I'm involved in the Peter Sears Poetry prize, that's fun. Do some of that stuff, office work, and then go home, I try to exercise a little bit, dinner, and maybe a little reading in the evening. And that's it, watch a movie, drink a beer, that's about my day. Thank you.

SE: What is the most interesting experience you've had while working at Western?

HH: Yeah, for legal reasons I can't go into that [all laugh] (no kind of kidding, uh no not really but. . .). It's, the accumulation of interesting experiences. I mean working with really interesting - I like working students and hearing their stories and reading their essays and their poems and - that's a wonderful part of this job. You really do get to know people. And that's fun! You know? I'm glad I'm not stuck in some office or some machine shop or you know with limited contact with interesting humans, young interesting humans they're so beautiful. So I mean and I have had some - you know again "creative conflicts" administration from time to time. I think it's good in a college to push it a little bit. I think it's a free and open, you know, opportunity to express yourself. But, and so there are again you know debates and things we have with each other but, I can't think of a single event, -but I could, you know write a, maybe a book. About all the wonderful things that have happened. Lot of great colleagues, best friends! I've just had such wonderful friends here, colleagues. Who I just hang with too! Outside of school. Uh, go fishing with, you go

to Crush [Crush Wine Bar], have a couple of drinks with. -And David Hargreaves has become my dear friend and many, many others. So, is that a satisfactory answer?

SE: Yeah

HH: Ok [all laugh].

[Inaudible].

VW: So my question is what are your plans and goals at Western now and for the future?

HH: Yeah, I really like to write so I want to continue writing, and you know it's interesting, writing for me has changed to, maybe it's changed for students. Rather than doing formal academic essays to publish in a scholarly journal, I've moved to creative writing, for sure poems but also essays like the personal essay, and then I'm even writing for the sporting press now. I write for fishing magazines. Not "how to" stuff you know like how to rig this thing, but experience, you know, new body of water, interesting fish, conditions, and then the philosophical, emotional things that go on in any sport, any event. Really, I think I'd like to teach more of that to students, maybe a magazine writing course. Because too, the field is changing and in fact, you know literature is a shrinking degree. I'm not saying it's not an important degree, but it seems like the way people want to study literature is changing. It's not like you study Shakespeare and then you write an analysis of tension in this part of *Hamlet* I mean that's still valuable, but uh, I'm interested in more contemporary issues and kind of like literary journalism. That's a good term: literary journalism. You still want to get your facts right, still want to do your research, but it's more something you'd read in a magazine, like more the popular audience would appreciate. And I want to do more of that, you know, I'm enjoying this poetry contest that we, it's our first year for that, and maybe

more of that. Maybe building, you know, more of a poetry scene here, but you know I'm having a good time. It's a great place. You know, no complaints at all.

VW: So is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience working here?

HH: It's been very positive, and you know Western, every school has its peculiarities and particularities, and we are, you know we teach a lot here, rather than U of O, for example, and so you have to manage your time right and you have to make choices about what you do, and I continue to make choices. I always tell people do what you want to do whenever possible, whenever possible. And of course students, right, you do what you have to do so you can do what you want to do. I get that. But, I really just, pursue, you know, pleasure. I got a new book idea about a book about veterans who go fishing to kind of help heal, as like a healing waters project that's interesting, you take a veteran fishing, and I'm interested in that. I know fishing has been a big emotional kind of healing process for a lot of people. Hemingway writes about this, and so that's my next kind of book project. Stay active, don't sit around, unless you're of course sitting around [all laugh] yeah, I think that covers it. Great, I mean this is a great class. I love oral histories too, like you know a hundred years from now I'll be dead and someone will find this and be like, "Well who is this guy Henry Hughes? [all laugh] I mean who is this guy?" and then you'll be famous maybe, wow you know that's interesting. I mean it, it's good you're doing this, I really admire that.

JD, BM, SE, VW: Thank you for your time.

HH: Thank you so much.