

BOOKS

Getting it Write

Nobody Needs To Tell David Eberhardt That It's Hard Out Here For A Poet



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By Petula Caesar | Posted 3/21/2007

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS EXPECT A VETERAN 1960s peace and civil-rights activist to still be active in social justice, but David Eberhardt is. For 30 years the now 65-year-old Baltimore poet and writer has worked at the Baltimore City Detention Center, bringing arts and enrichment programs to the inmate population.

His activist streak was stoked by his parents, but his prisoner empathy comes from personal experience. In 1970 Eberhardt began serving 21 months of a three-year sentence at Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary in Pennsylvania after being found guilty of mutilation/obliteration/destruction of government property, depredation of government property, obstruction of Selective Service records, and conspiracy to commit the above.

On Oct. 17, 1967, a then 26-year-old Eberhardt, along with Father Philip Berrigan, the Rev. James Mengel, and their friend Tom Lewis, entered Baltimore's Selective Service office at downtown's Baltimore Customs House and poured their own blood on draft files in protest of the Vietnam War. They were dubbed "The Baltimore Four" by local and national media. The following spring, on May 17, 1968, Berrigan burned draft records at the Catonsville Selective Service office along with eight others, becoming "The Catonsville Nine." (War protests in quiet suburbs like Catonsville were rare in those days.) The group received national attention and prison terms of varying lengths, but Eberhardt and Berrigan refused to go quietly.

"When it came time for us to turn ourselves in after the appeal went to the Supreme Court and was turned down, we went into the underground, hiding with supporters as a way to continue resistance," Eberhardt recalls. "I'm sure we could have been charged for that. We were going to appear in an 'Up From Under' rally in Manhattan and were hiding in a Catholic church there when we were captured hours before the rally, which went off without us. The FBI had guns

drawn--as if we might shoot back? But we practiced nonviolence. But they didn't--and still don't--get it."

Ever since, Eberhardt has spent most of his life as a writer and poet--"but never to make money," he clarifies. His personal involvement with Baltimore's poetry community stretches back to the 1960s when he first read his poems at various rallies and protests. And the Oberlin College graduate just published his second poetry collection, *Blue Running Lights*, with Baldwin-based Abecedarian Books.

At first brush, Eberhardt comes across as a sweet, thoughtful, good-natured man. His expressive, broad face is framed by a shock of straight white hair, his blue eyes contain a clear calmness. You feel as if you know everything about him just by looking at him, but he can still surprise you.

As in, you don't expect him to talk about sex; he compares the very gradual waning of his libido in his later years to "getting down off a wild horse--*very slowly*." And you don't expect him to analyze the lyrics to Three-Six Mafia's Oscar-winning song "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp" from *Hustle and Flow*. Eberhardt read the lyrics at his recent book release at Hampden's Minas Gallery, marveling at the shades and levels of meaning in the coarse rhyme.

"It's very politically incorrect, a pimp talking about his hoes," Eberhardt muses during an interview at his North Baltimore home. "But there is something about it I like, probably the honesty. And I love the Memphis twang. It does something to the words. The word 'hating' is in here, but the way he pronounces it, it sounds like 'heighten.' The way he pronounces words makes the meanings change."

Unexpectedness, openness, and honesty are key elements of Eberhardt's existence. The windows of his home are devoid of curtains, shades, or anything that blocks your view of his personal places--his bedroom, library, and kitchen. He doesn't do anything to block your view of himself, either. He openly admits that he started going to poetry readings "to drink and pick up girls, to hear other poets, and to be envious and condescending by turns about their work."

He first became aware of poetry at Oberlin in the early '60s. "Joan Baez sang there, and for me, after an uptight prep school, the rebelliousness had a lot of allure," he says. Beat poetry was king at readings, an early forerunner of things to come in that "the beat poets opened things up to where almost anyone could consider themselves a poet," he says. "You could just rap, you know--get up in front of an audience and spiel."

After Oberlin, Eberhardt moved to Baltimore County first, then the city, where he taught at the Boys' Latin School--where he got bored and joined the civil-rights movement. "I needed some action, something to write about," he says, by way of explaining his entry into Baltimore's slowly evolving poetry community. It came to the fore in the early 1970s. "[Baltimore] always had a very academic scene with the writing seminars at Hopkins," he says. "At that time, Daniel Mark Epstein was a big person in town. He was very highly regarded, along with David Beaudouin, both doing readings at Hopkins. Poets came through town, and Hopkins was where they read."

"But then there was a healthy beat scene over at Maryland Institute College of Art on the artistic side. It seemed like the academic scene would not mix so much with the more beat poets. During the '80s you had Joe Carderelli over at MICA having readings--he'd bring in famous people, beat poets. So you had both elements of the scene here."

Slam poetry's 1990s emergence flew in the face of both schools of thought. "There wasn't too much of a black scene until then, though there were a few black poets," Eberhardt explains. Slams had a preponderance of black male poets with powerful, even overpowering voices who couldn't find homes for their talents in the beat or academic communities, which, no matter what else they were, were still predominately white.

"There were those who felt slams did not produce good poetry, real poetry," he says. "For a time the poetry scene pretty much was a black scene because of the popularity of slams. But slams really re-energized the entire poetry scene, and it has never really died since. It helped everyone find their voice. Now it's a big mix. There really is more going on now than ever. There is an intersection between black poets, white poets, and all kinds of poets."

Eberhardt's collection is a lifelong compilation of poetry and prose--some of the poems included date back more than 30 years and were written during his activist days and when he was in prison. Some poems were written as recently as months ago. It is a striking work because of the wide range of topics and its beautiful phrasing--witness "Psalm," which he wrote while in Lewisburg: "Somewhere the poise In a stone Might feed the poor, In that Wealth distributed Equally . . . But not here."

"I'm very much into the sound of a thing and the image," Eberhardt says of his own work. "And if I'll say 'somewhere the poise in a stone might feed the poor,' it has a political point. But someone could say 'poise in a stone'--what is that? To me it just sounds fabulous. Poise is a really juicy word, and the word 'stone' can be extremely beautiful. Stones can be extremely beautiful--I like to play with the mystery of words. I have poems I still can't quite figure out. The poems suggest things, and that's it. The great poet Wallace Stevens said, 'A poem should be understandable . . . almost.'"

Willingness to find connections between the profane and the beautiful--even when the connections are obscure--is what Eberhardt's poetry is all about. "I throw in the things I love all together, like sex and politics," he admits. "Dylan Thomas started an acceptance of obscurity in poetry, which most people think is a curse. It probably turns some people off to my stuff. I free-associate naturally. Of course, it means something to me--naturally, I can explain every line and analyze it to death, but for someone just picking it up, 'what does it mean?' isn't always answered."

Reading his work is an active process, and in some cases it is frustrating. You can sense something there, just below the surface of the words on the page that you desperately want to understand. His poetry forces you to participate in it, almost the same way Eberhardt felt forced to fight the injustices he saw around him during the '60s.

"My father was a minister, my mom a teacher and an organist, so I personally always had quite a bit of rebellious, provoking sort of attitude myself," he says. "But you have to remember we had the draft, so no matter what, to some extent we were worried about our own skins. But the

'60s themselves seem to be like a golden time, a mystic time of forces coming together--civil rights, peace, feminism, and green stuff.

"But things come in cycles, and while it looks all passive now, a lot is still going on if you know where to look," he continues. "The media doesn't cover it. But now you have soldiers that are in the military actually protesting the war. It's out there. It's not as wonderful as it was with the student stuff and what we had . . . it's just different now." He pauses for a moment. "But poets are always politically aware. I haven't heard of too many Republican poets--or poetry in general that favors war. Writers in general tend to be to the left."

Why might that be? "Because they have imaginations and are sensitive and can see beneath things and see what's really true," he says. "And they like progress. The Republicans, pro-war people, right-wingers--they're bottled up, confined. Their ideology is too rigid. In the great writing history you don't find a whole lot of right-wing writers or poets, especially political poets."

And for Eberhardt, a poem itself can be a political act. "A poem should be mysterious in a beautiful way, but that leads you to a question of political poetry," he says. "How can you write political poetry which has to mean [something] and has to be plain and do something really mysterious with lots of color and beauty? Is it going to be beautiful if it's a political poem? I mean, a beautiful poem is political in that you couldn't be out on the front lines firing an AK-47 and be very concerned with beauty. So just to have a poem is peaceful. But to make a poem that preaches peace or leads people to be peaceful, that's hard. When you talk about political poets, the most political poet is probably Bob Marley."

His current version of activism is his job at the city jail. "I bring people in to help people with finding jobs, addiction problems, I organize workshops," he says. "There's a lot of stuff going on at the jail. Most jails and prisons are warehouses, the goal is to keep people from escaping, to punish them, to take away their freedom. We've got a lot of people in social work, a lot of people coming in. We have tutors from Hopkins, we have poets, we had African dancers for Black History Month. A lot of the local spoken-word poets come through. Inmates share their work with me."

Eberhardt says he doesn't write as much poetry as he used to. "I think there is an age thing where you don't have as much juice," he says. "At this point what my poetry does for me is that it's a product that I can continue to entertain myself with--because the first audience is me. I turn myself on. Now, if you read enough you will see if you're turning other people on. But you're not gonna get them unless you put yourself out there. So this is my way of continuing to be out there."