

# LOVE AND MISTAKES AND REGRETS AND SENTENCES

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHESTON KNAPP

RYAN LICINI

Cheston Knapp is the managing editor of one of the most respected literary journals in America: *Tin House*. Over the years, *Tin House* has published some of the best contemporary writers—Nobel Prize winner Alice Munro, Pulitzer Prize winner Anthony Doerr, Stephen King, and more.

Cheston is also an accomplished writer, published in *Tin House* and *One Story*. In 2015 he received an Oregon Literary Fellowship for literary nonfiction.

Curious if I was going to meet a writer more Apollonian or Dionysian, more Superman or Deadpool, I set out on January 28<sup>th</sup> to meet with Cheston at the Dragonfly Coffee Shop in northwest Portland. We sat for more than an hour discussing editing, writing, life, and a bathroom door (ironically painted to resemble a forest). There is a great mystery surrounding what happened to the recording of that conversation (some have accused the NSA of swiping it; still others believe that the very aura of Mr. Knapp interfered with the equipment), but the fact remains that it was lost, forever. So it goes.

What follows is a tribute to that conversation, reconstructed via email with the help of Cheston Knapp.



**LICINI:** You received your bachelor's degree in English from The College of William & Mary. Did you pursue that degree with a specific vocation in mind?

**KNAPP:** Not really, no. To be honest, I didn't know there were English-type vocations out there that

weren't teaching, whether that be high school or college or what. And one of the things I picked up at school was this soul-deep, cockles-level knowledge that I wasn't meant to be an academic. My professors would be the first to confirm this. My interests were always too scattered and diffuse, too rangy for the demands of higher higher learning. What I developed there, though, was a work ethic. And so when I started reading contemporary literature during my senior year, I did so with the same degree of seriousness and attention that my Milton and Wittgenstein seminars demanded of me.

**LICINI:** In 2010, you published your debut story, "A Minor Momentousness in the History of Love," in *One Story*. Can you describe the process of getting that piece published?

**KNAPP:** I'd sent that story out to a handful of places and it came running home, shoulders slumped, in tears: Rejected! I gave up on it for a spell. But then a friend encouraged me to submit to *One Story*, so I trotted it out of its pen of shame and languor and to my surprise and delight they took it.

**LICINI:** You've said the idea for the story came from watching tennis in an attempt to distract yourself from an overwhelming feeling of homesickness. Do you feel that sadness and discomfort are necessary components of inspiration?

**KNAPP:** There's this Romantic poet named Novalis who thought that all philosophy was homesickness, "the urge to be at home everywhere." I like that. As a culture we look at sadness and discomfort as things to be gotten over, treated. That they're deficient states of being. I don't like that. Art is a response to our dissatisfaction with the way things are. It's both protest and embrace.

**LICINI:** In 2015, you received an Oregon Literary Fellowship for your work in literary nonfiction. I know you've written fiction before, but most of your published works have been creative nonfiction. Do you consider yourself primarily a nonfiction writer?

**KNAPP:** I don't really think of myself as one or the other. Identity markers like that spook me. I don't even like to think of myself as a writer. It's more like I'm a guy who writes. I can say with confidence that I can't imagine what my life would look like without it. As far as the projects go, I have a collection of essays that I'm finishing up now, a handful of stories in a drawer, and then a longer, third thing that might be a novel or might be nothing. Time will tell. I tend to cycle through working on them.

**LICINI:** What draws you to nonfiction?

**KNAPP:** I think I hit a wall somewhere in my mid-to-late twenties where I was finding it hard to get at everything I wanted to get at in fiction. I wrote a couple essays and found I could move more

freely in them. They more accurately matched the way my mind moved. Essays are a more protean and generous a form, in their way. They can be narrative or lyric or ruminative, can accommodate so much, whereas fiction has certain requirements that need to be met. Maybe it's that I hadn't yet grokked my own way of fulfilling those requirements.

**LICINI:** In the most recent issue of *The Paris Review*, there was an interview with Gordon Lish. Speaking about Raymond Carver, Lish says, "I saw in Carver's pieces something I could fuck around with." As an editor, what is your reaction to that?

**KNAPP:** Say whatever you like about Lish the man, but there's basically no argument worth a grain that those early Carver stories are better without Lish's cuts. That whole dust up about Carver and Lish was interesting to me only in that it pointed out how deeply we still hold on to the artist as a sort of monkish visionary who reports to us from the outermost limit of human perception and potential. Under this view, the editor is an interloper, an adversary, but really the situation's deeper and more complicated than just that. This involves quasi-mystical ideas about communion and trust and care, all of which are a lot harder to talk about than believing the artist is a lone wolf.

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**LICINI:** You spend about 80% of your time at *Tin House* reading and editing submissions. Does spending that much time in other people's work have an effect on your own writing?

**KNAPP:** It's almost impossible for it not to. But that doesn't have to be a bad thing. I think what it's given me, in the end, is a sense of the kind of story or essay I'm interested in writing. After having read so many well-made stories, minor feats of emotional algebra, I think I'm drawn to stories that are at least partially broken, that have some rogue element that shouldn't work but does.

**LICINI:** *Tin House* was founded in the late 1990s. How does a journal achieve so much stature and gain so much respect in such a short period of time?

**KNAPP:** I hate to be cynical here, but I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that we came out of the gates willing to pay writers a competitive wage for their work. This was part of what our publisher and editor in chief, Win McCormack, wanted to ensure. But aside from that, I think the design elements were important, attractive. Another thing that had stuck in Win's craw was how boring other literary magazines looked. He wanted a magazine with more pizzazz. He brought in elements from glossy mags, like coverlines and pull quotes and subheads, which made the reading experience more inviting, more fun.

**LICINI:** What brought you from Virginia to Portland? Was it *Tin House* specifically?

**KNAPP:** I moved out here on a whim. Back in the mid-aughts Portland was still semi under the radar, a cheap place to live with a lot of bands and art and other stuff going on. I was only vaguely aware of *Tin House* at the time—only vaguely aware of what a literary magazine even was. I think this is true of a lot of liberal arts schools, but judging by the curriculum at W&M [William & Mary] you'd think that literature ended in 1964 or something. We just weren't exposed to the idea that literature was being made by folks who were alive, like now, folks who were breathing the same polluted cultural air and trying to make sense of it. Anyway, I applied for an internship at the magazine but didn't hear back for more than three months, during which time I worked a lot of odd jobs and for *The Oregonian*, where I wrote a couple columns for a suburban weekly they used to publish back in the prehistoric days when print papers were a thing.

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**LICINI:** You have been with *Tin House* for more than half its life-span. Is there anything specific that you have implemented that has added to its success?

**KNAPP:** It's tough to say, really. On the business side of things, I've done my best to act responsibly, whether it be in renegotiating our printing contracts or in streamlining the production schedule. That's all pretty boring to talk about. But I think it matters—in order for a magazine to be successful, there has to be a magazine. There are magazines out there that call themselves a quarterly, but only come out two or three times a year. They're that far behind schedule. Editorially speaking, I couldn't say. I'm one voice on a board of five or six. So I can say I've influenced the content at least somewhere between 16.6 and 20%.

**LICINI:** Every year, VIDA chooses a group of literary magazines and does a comprehensive analysis of the ratio of male to female contributions. *Tin House* has been shown to have one of the best overall scores, with more than half of the journal being from female contributors. Is balancing male and female voices something that *Tin House* makes a conscious effort to achieve?

**KNAPP:** We publish the best stuff that crosses our desk in the span of about four months. If we're conscious of anything, it's to solicit work from as many women writers as men.

**LICINI:** Over the years, *Tin House* has published some major writers—Alice Munro, Ursula Le Guin, Stephen King—what is it like to work with these writers?

**KNAPP:** I can't speak for The King, who I didn't work with. But it's a surreal feeling, working on a story by living legends like Le Guin and Munro. With Munro, I remember writing out everything I wanted to say, every little query. I was walking around with her number in my phone for almost two weeks without calling her, like it was a juicy secret or something. I'd expected her to be this serious, über-literary woman, someone who would quote Chekhov or Babel at me or something, but when I got her on the phone she was spritely and energetic and totally disarming. It's among the best experiences I've had as an editor. As is the stuff I've worked on with Ursula Le Guin, who's patient and sharp and not unlike a sage. I learned so, so much from these women and I'm endlessly grateful to them.

**LICINI:** Did you approach their work in a different way?

**KNAPP:** As far as the game plan went, editing-wise, I just did my best to treat it like another story. I don't think you want to be too fawning or sycophantic with writers of that caliber. The way to win their respect is to show you've read the story as closely as anyone ever will. I sometimes think of editing as a form of feng shui or redecoration. I go into your living room and move stuff around. I rearrange the furniture, repaint the walls. All this is an effort to hold a writer accountable for the decisions he or she has made, often subconsciously, as they wrote. I want the room to be as welcoming and warm as possible. In my experience, it's the more accomplished writers who hunger for that kind of editorial attention. It's the fledgling writers who take exception.

**LICINI:** *Tin House* seems to make an effort to share new voices. What do you look for in a piece by a new author?

**KNAPP:** Oh man, this is a doozy of a question. Probably the most common and the toughest one I get. In short, I don't really know what I'm looking for. There's typically something about the language that grabs me, the style. Some slant way of describing the world, a character. I know some people read for story, for plot, and others for character, emotion. I think maybe I'm more granular. I just want to feel like I'm in the hands of a stylist, someone who wields words like a weapon, a whip. But yeah, it's always a hoot to publish someone's first story. It's an honor, really, to help launch a career. It's one of the reasons all of us on staff stay in the game.

**LICINI:** You started at *Tin House* as an intern and eventually worked your way up to managing editor. I'm interested to know how you transitioned from intern to staff.

**KNAPP:** I feel like I was just very lucky in this and many other things. For the year I interned, I made sure that no opportunity went untaken. And I'm not just talking about the chance to read a manuscript or whatever. If orders needed to be filled, I stuffed envelopes. If coffee needed to be

brewed or procured, I brewed, procured. If the garage needed tidying, I tidied. I think this conveyed to the powers that be something of my devotion or loyalty or work ethic. And the thing about a place like *Tin House* is it's small. It's got a family vibe. So when people move on, positions tend to be filled from inside the organization. I just happened to come along when there was some turnover.

**LICINI:** Are there specific things you look for in interns now, when you are considering whether or not to bring them on staff?

**KNAPP:** The one time it's happened under my watch, I was looking for someone who not only could fulfill all the duties but also fit with the family. It was a really hard decision because after we narrowed down the field, we still had four exceedingly qualified people. It's not one thing, never is. The margins we're talking are infinitesimal.

**LICINI:** Do you have any advice for aspiring writers in regards to getting published?

**KNAPP:** I don't mean to be coy here, but I don't. Working in publishing has only deepened the mystery for me. If anything, my advice would be not to put too much pressure on the publishing side of things. Focus on the work itself. This may be naïve, but I sort of think that the rest will take care of itself.

**LICINI:** What is the most important thing for a writer to do, when developing their craft?

**KNAPP:** Read. Fall in love. Make mistakes. Cultivate regrets. And hang around sentences.



With the interview over, coffee cups long since drained, we sat at that little table for some time just shooting the breeze. Cheston pulled out a camera and asked if he could snap a quick shot (a new hobby he's fallen into). I pulled out his debut story and asked for an autograph (a little memento of the occasion). I felt like the conversation couldn't have been more complete . . . until I remembered the question that I had most wanted to find answered . . . the question that had first formed my curiosity.

**LICINI:** Do you consider yourself more Dionysian, or Apollonian?

**KNAPP:** Ha. I've never thought about how this would shake out. I'm probably 60:20, Apollonian to Dionysian, with a rogue twenty percent in there that's neither and both.