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Brian Sonia-Wallace's The Poetry of Strangers: What I Learned Traveling America with a Typewriter

John Brantingham · Wednesday, August 19th, 2020

Brian Sonia-Wallace's mission and vision as a poet is beautiful and compelling. He is a full-time poet, and he is able to make a living writing poetry, which is an impressive feat, but simply paying his bills is neither his mission nor his vision. Sonia-Wallace is a kind of performance poet, someone who will come to your party or mall or sit on the street and write poetry for you for a fee. I am thrilled that he is able to make a living this way, but I love the way that when strangers approach him curious as to what he is doing or clear as to his mission he asks them what poem they need today.

That question is at the center of who Sonia-Wallace seems to be and the central question of his new memoir *The Poetry of Strangers: What I Learned Traveling America with a Typewriter*. It is a fascinating way to get into the soul of a stranger. For he shows us in his memoir that art and poetry specifically is not simply a luxury saved for those wealthy enough to have leisure time to idle; poetry helps to root out the ways we are in pain and our way forward to healing. At least, Sonia-Wallace's poetry does that. This is a vision of poetry that helps us understand the art form, but also helps us to understand our way through the depersonalization that seems to be crushing so many people in the 21st century.

Sonia-Wallace's poetry is a way through that depersonalization. It is a way into those feelings that are universal but feel special to us and separate us. In this, his book is a beautifully touching journey. It was for me in any case. He was a poet chosen to be a poet-in-residence on Amtrak and in the Mall of America. In both of these places, he found that people needed him, and without ego or smugness, he wrote for them.

What he taught me in this book is a kind of humility that I need in my own poetry. His poetry is not about himself. Don't get me wrong. I don't think there's anything wrong with poetry about the self. It's necessary. However, I admire the degree to which his poetry is about other people. It is about taking his skills and helping people to express themselves. He is using poetry as a medium of healing and I cannot imagine a more beautiful mission in life. I highly recommend his novel. This is a book that this world needs now and into the future.

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