

## **Interview with Gregory Alan Norton** **Author of *An Infinity of Days in the Psychotic Atomik Empire***

*Today, Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views talks with author and activist, Gregory Alan Norton, about his new book “An Infinity of Days in the Psychotic Atomik Empire.”*

*Gregory, a Chicago writer, has been an activist for civil rights in the peace and labor movements for decades. He served as an organizer and newspaper editor for the United Steelworkers and has participated in other unions as well. Norton has had many of his short stories published in literary publications and his new book is a compilation of this diverse collection.*

**Juanita:** Welcome to Reader Views Gregory, and thanks for the opportunity to talk with you about your new book, a collection of short stories titled “*An Infinity of Days in the Psychotic Atomik Empire.*” Would you start by telling us about this collection? What is the common theme/s that brings these stories together?

**Gregory:** These are stories about common people battling back against authoritarian bosses, and insane, money-crazed corporations with whatever means they have at hand – sabotage, bomb threats, and wildcat strikes. All the stories take place in Chicago and no characters were killed in the making of this collection.

**Juanita:** When did you write these stories, and have they all been published?

**Gregory:** The stories were written in a period from about 1995 to 2002. Most of the stories were first published in literary magazines such as *The Princeton Arts Review*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, *Struggle*, and *Missing Spoke Press Anthology*.

**Juanita:** Why did you decide to compile them into book form?

**Gregory:** I came to a point in mid-life where I had written a number of novels but couldn’t find any publishers or agents interested in publishing them. I was told over and over – you don’t have any publication credits. So, I decided to write some stories with the same focus and setting and even interlocking characters with the idea of getting them published in literary magazines first, then bringing them as a collection to a publisher. And it turns out that was the first plan in my entire life that actually worked out.

**Juanita:** Gregory, what is “the psychotic atomik empire”?

**Gregory:** My work is heavily informed by the Beat Writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs. They all had various terms to describe American culture that reflected their black humor. Nelson Algren talked about The Neon Wilderness. Henry Miller wrote about The Air Conditioned Nightmare. Burroughs wrote about Interzone. Corporate America sings about the American Dream. I think my title reflects the reality for most working people in America. We live in a country where the government gets away with randomly declaring war on other nations, then lying about the reasons for the murderous assault. We live in a country where it's ok to make a buck anyway you can including telling people they are entirely safe living downstream from a nuclear reactor that proceeds to melt down as Three Mile Island did. Let's face it, our leaders are mostly psychotic and they have their fingers on the nuclear trigger.

**Juanita:** Would you give us some background into your involvement with various social movements? What draws you to these issues and being "a voice for the people"?

**Gregory:** My mother's French speaking family lived in various coal towns in southern Illinois and Indiana and as a child I heard the wild stories of the United Mine Workers and some of the desperate strikes. The French miners had a strong streak of anarcho-sydicalism that probably went back to the time of the Paris Commune.

I grew up in an America that was shaken to its roots in the 1950s by the Civil Rights Movement, and by the Peace Movement of the 1960s that arose against the Vietnam War. I got involved in a student group, Students for a Democratic Society that took a leading role against the war.

**Juanita:** Would you comment on the humor, as well as the irony, that is conveyed in your stories?

**Gregory:** I admire the realism of writers such as Zola in *Germinal* but I don't think American readers enjoy such unrelenting examination of the world. If you are going to write in the social protest genre, then I think your work has to have some kind of element of humor or very few Americans are going to read it.

**Juanita:** How many stories in "*An Infinity of Days in the Psychotic Atomik Empire*"? Do you have many that didn't make it into this collection?

**Gregory:** The current collection has 23 stories. A number of stories didn't make it into the collection because they were either too experimental or a little too far off the path that these others have taken. Curiously, some of those were published in literary magazines, but they just didn't feel right in this collection.

**Juanita:** Would you give us an idea of some of your characters and the situations they find themselves in?

**Gregory:** In one case we have two young women working in a doll factory in order to pay the rent. They come into conflict with their authoritarian boss. One of them gets fired, and the other retaliates by changing the script for the doll's "voice." Another woman is sexually harassed by her boss and

winds up “taking the bull by the horns.” Another character can’t talk the boss into a day off of work, so his girlfriend has to resort to something radical.

**Juanita:** How important do you feel activism is this day and age? Do you feel that social change will come from individual action or from collective group action?

**Gregory:** I think it’s pretty clear that only collective action by masses of people can change the world. And I think it’s pretty clear that we need a lot of change. In the United States we have about 43 million people who don’t have health insurance. That’s a disgrace that the richest country in the world can’t provide basic health care for its people. We have a war raging that the majority of American people clearly voted to end in the last election and yet it rages on. We could use a healthy dose of democracy in this country.

**Juanita:** Are any of your stories inspired by real people and real events?

**Gregory:** I would say they are composites of people I’ve encountered along the way and some of them, like *Forklift Fighters*, were based on stories I heard around the break table in factories. I think a lot of blue collar folk lore is probably based on real events but where or when is a mystery.

**Juanita:** These characters represent the dignity and strength of humanity. Would you comment on the similarity of their various struggles and their common message regarding the “psychotic atomic empire”?

**Gregory:** What I have tried to convey is the steady strength of character many working class people show despite great adversity. Although they have to struggle to make ends meet, they often show great courage in standing up to a system that’s stacked against them.

**Juanita:** What can you tell us about the endings of your stories?

Gregory: One of my favorite writers is Jorge Amado, a world famous Brazilian writer. At one point he said something like, “I don’t write fancy like T.S. Elliot. I always like to have the little guys win in the end.” I thought to myself, that’s not a bad way to go.

**Juanita:** Gregory, why do you seem to possess a strong insight and understanding of the emotional depth of these characters and the issues they experience?

**Gregory:** I try to create characters who exhibit typical human personalities. I actually follow a formula of typical human types that’s based on the theories of Jung. I think I’m able to achieve some resonance because those theories have proved out and moved on into practical applications.

**Juanita:** All of the stories in this collection take place in Chicago. Why did you write with this particular setting? What is it about Chicago that lent itself well to this theme?

**Gregory:** I think Chicago functions well as a microcosm of what’s happening in the United States. We probably have virtually every nationality in the world living here and all the major social

problems that occur in the United States are represented in Chicago. My childhood neighborhood, Uptown, used to be famous for being a multi-national slum.

**Juanita:** What would you say are the prominent social issues affecting the blue collar working population today?

**Gregory:** Health care is a major issue. Jobs that pay a living wage are an issue. We have millions of hard working people who are “illegal.” That’s an issue. Getting a college education is an issue. Affordable housing is an issue. And, of course, global warming and the wholesale destruction of our environment for profit is an issue. Virtually none of these issues are on the national agenda.

**Juanita:** Have these issues changed over the years, or are the issues of the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s fundamentally the same as 2007? Please explain.

**Gregory:** Curiously, the issues seem to remain the same, but as a nation we seem to be going backwards on them. Most people seem to think the Civil Rights Movement is over with and then we have a major radio personality use racially insulting language against a distinguished group of African American women athletes. We find the Klan growing by 40% a year in membership. After Vietnam no one imagined a President would blunder into a needless war again, then keep the US in it – even after an election that clearly indicated that the American people wanted to end it. People are beginning to realize that we are in a state of permanent war and it has nothing to do with democracy and everything to do with natural resources such as oil.

**Juanita:** Gregory, do you think there is any hope for the honest working class citizen to maintain their rights and dignity against the “the psychotic atomik empire”?

**Gregory:** Our hope lies in mass organizing, direct action, and linked electoral initiatives. People have to unite across racial lines, gender lines, and across borders. Back in the mid 1990s, a major tire company tried to put an end to the United Rubber Workers. That small union merged with the United Steelworkers, my union, but everyone said, “The battle is over. The union is crushed. There is nothing we can do.” The Steelworkers ignored all that, united with groups in Japan, Brazil, and elsewhere to fight that multi-national company. In the US we set up picket lines of volunteers all over the country. A few months later, one of the most powerful companies in the world sent up the white flag and agreed to negotiate and returned thousands of industrial workers to their jobs. That’s the kind of dog fight we are in today.

**Juanita:** Gregory, are you still writing short stories? Do you have any other projects in the works?

**Gregory:** I’m currently concentrating on a new novel project entitled, “*The Psychology of Starlight*” that deals with the issues of immigration and compares the United States to one of the more notorious “death squad democracies” in Latin America.

**Juanita:** I understand that you also have a novel out titled “*There Ain’t No Justice, Just Us.*” Would you tell us about it?

**Gregory:** That is a self-published novel that did, however, get some good reviews. It deals with a real wildcat strike that broke out in South Chicago in 1979.

**Juanita:** What keeps you inspired to write about the cultural struggles of everyday people?

**Gregory:** I draw inspiration from all around me such as the successful strike of the janitors in Los Angeles a few years back, the “Justice for Janitors” campaign. That has inspired me to create a fictional Chicago version of those events in “*The Psychology of Starlight*.”

**Juanita:** Gregory, how can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

**Gregory:** My website is [www.gregoryalannorton.com](http://www.gregoryalannorton.com)

**Juanita:** Thanks for the opportunity to talk with you today Gregory. Your insights and experience into American social issues of yesterday and today are very informative, and we recommend everyone check out your multi-faceted, humorous collection “*An Infinity of Days in the Psychotic Atomik Empire*.” Before we depart, do you have any final thoughts for your readers?

**Gregory:** : “Hasta la victoria siempre.”