

Interview with How Kuff, author of “Changing History”

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by How Kuff, who is here to talk about his new novel “Changing History.”

How Kuff has worked eclectically and traveled the world, always with an eye toward nature and human affairs. His childhood quest to understand patterns and relationships led to degrees in Philosophy (B.S.) and Mathematics (B.S./M.S.), and a nature-based, energy-independent community-active lifestyle in the forests of the Ozark Mountains. “Changing History” developed from How Kuff’s love of philosophy and his infatuation with Tibet.

Tyler: Welcome, How. To begin, I understand “Changing History” has been compared to Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales.” Can you tell us what the similarity is and why you chose to write the book using this format?

How: “Canterbury Tales” was Chaucer’s attempt to tell stories of humanity from the perspective of many different people who meet by happenstance along their travels. It consists of an outward ‘frame’ tale that provides the background and setting for the gathering of pilgrims and the impetus for each to tell a personal story.

My goal in writing “Changing History” was to explore humanity from the perspective of the early 21st century. I find that the first person story can be a very powerful tool to understand the circumstances and motivations for the actions and events in someone’s life. I wanted to develop distinct and memorable characters each with a story reflecting conditions and dilemmas that are central to our humanity and span history and geography. And I wanted the characters and their stories to interact synergistically to create a deeper and broader view of humanity. Chaucer’s framework was the perfect vehicle.

Tyler: Chaucer’s characters each tell a story, but not necessarily a story about themselves. Do each of your characters tell their own personal stories? Was it writing in the first person that appealed to you so the reader could feel closer to the characters?

How: Yes I find first person stories allow the reader to get into the thoughts and emotions of the character. This was definitely not the usual approach in Chaucer’s time.

Tyler: Will you tell us about the characters? What made you choose to assemble these specific characters together?

How: My characters and their stories reflect our relationships with nature and the world, and our efforts to use language to frame and encapsulate experiences beyond the capabilities of words. They illuminate our struggles to find meaning, value and self-expression in a complex depersonalized society and the struggle of society to maintain order and status quo. They reflect the conflicts between government/the rule of law and self-expression and freedom; between corporate global economics/politics and the long-term benefits and needs of people including energy, water and other natural resources. They examine our relationship to past events that provide the foundation for our present conditions and question our current responsibilities toward those events. They examine our relationships to the actions of our government and question our personal culpability for those actions. The characters search for love and well-being and bump into power mongering, hate and violence. And each is striving to have some control and power over the circumstances and events in their life.

The characters and their life stories took form from situations and circumstances that I believed would bring life to these universal struggles. I wanted each to be unique and I wanted each to be emotionally charged. Somehow they materialized and I embellished them with my imagination.

Tyler: The book is listed as being a novel, yet it is also a collection of short stories. Why do you consider it a novel?

How: I think of it as a novel because there is a bigger story than the individual tales. The larger frame story is a story of a happenstance meeting of souls on a stormy night in a teahouse in the mountains of the Tibet. In this story (at least) 7 of them come to a radically different understanding of humanity and experience a life-changing gestalt. The poetic interludes are included to help the reader reflect upon, and sometimes anticipate, the drama and philosophy of the stories. Though definitely untraditional, I believe that this still qualifies to be called a novel.

Tyler: Will you share a little of this understanding of humanity they come to, or will you be giving away the ending by doing so?

How: Drawing from the Buddhist perspective (mind), the quantum theory perspective (energy) and the deep ecology perspective (life systems), all living things are connected. There is nothing that we can do that does not effect all around us. When we imagine ourselves to be 'other' than our milieu, we continually make ignorant and foolish mistakes. In this respect we are all World Citizens. I take these concepts even further by postulating that we cannot be separated from all that has occurred and all that will occur. Once again to think we can leads to tragic mistakes. The basis of our human ethic must be grounded in these connections.

Tyler: Will you summarize one of the stories for us?

How: Chapter 5, One Mind is the story of a young, brilliant and beautiful mathematician recently out of graduate school working for a military contractor developing the mathematics for advanced guidance systems for personally directed bombs and missiles. She works in a clean and comfortable office, has been told that she is a patriotic citizen and highly commended for her work. But she never gets to see the results of her labors and feels uneasy about the tensions in the world and the use of her talents. She drowns out her uneasiness by drinking and partying after work and can't shake the feeling of how quickly her youthful idealism dried up after leaving graduate school.

One morning on the street in front of her office she is greeted by a crowd of anti-war demonstrators shouting at her about her culpability in the spread of global violence. She struggles, internally questioning her role in the scheme of things while trying to grasp the vehement anger directed toward her. Later she meets one of the demonstration leaders who confronts her and charms her and she decides to take a look at the 'other' side. Her adventures with some of the activists pull her from her increasingly difficult internal justifications for her societal position and provoke her to re-evaluate her work and responsibilities eventually leading to her world travels.

Tyler: Why did you choose to tell this specific story "One Mind" and where did the idea come from?

How: This story has personal roots and arises from my anti-war background, my mathematics graduate studies and from stories of fellow grad students who went to work for military contractors. I added a lot of accumulated knowledge about global economics, patriotism/nationalism, personal responsibility, the effects of energy consumption, and the tactics and methods those with power use to continue the stream of products and profits.

The drama and dilemma came from the muses.

Tyler: Where did you come up with the idea for "Changing History"?

How: I wanted to address the continuing cycles of hate and violence that have plagued our history without specifying countries, religions, people or politics. I wanted the characters to represent different races, countries, sexes and ages. I thought that the messages could be viewed in more general terms and would be more powerful if they were not directly linked to particular world situations. Tibet was the exception because I needed a grounding place for the story and I view the Tibet/China problem as the pinnacle (literally and figuratively) of what is wrong with the world. I wanted my characters to struggle with real world problems and to address global crises that humans will be dealing with over the coming decades and centuries. Each of the stories has those timeless qualities.

Tyler: Why did you feel Tibet was the best setting for "Changing History"?

How: Tibet is the roof of the world both geographically and metaphorically. The Buddhists of Tibet have deeply and continuously studied 'mind' for more than 1000 years and strongly believe that all humans are connected and share what they call the 'universal mind'.

"Changing History" contains 7 character stories dealing with real world 21st century circumstances and events. As we all know, in our times the world has become a much smaller place and the "Changing History" character stories have connections resulting from global economics, politics, religion and violence. The Buddhist monk and nun who are listening to the stories help the characters' become aware of metaphysical connections among all humans, which furthers understanding of the intertwined nature of the tales.

Additionally as the stories unfold, water comes to be seen as an essential unifying element of all life as well as a very precious commodity. Tibet is the source of water for 1/3 of the Earth's population and thus also an important point of global connections.

"Changing History" is about the conflict and violence that has plagued us through history and the Chinese invasion of Tibet and the subsequent suppression of the people and control of the resources is a powerful example of our repeated tragedies.

So Tibet provided the perfect environment for the characters to meet while also allowing me to help bring awareness to its historical richness, beauty and magic while simultaneously expounding on the atrocities of the Chinese to the Tibetan people.

Tyler: Will you tell us a little more about how water is the unifying element of the novel?

How: Chapter 7, One World, is a critical look at the global economy. The main character, Cibi, is a shepherd in a third world country that is being overrun by the global quest for energy and raw materials. The traditional economy is being swallowed by huge corporate retailers. In the process the clean water necessary for traditional life is being usurped by the industries. The government is getting payments for the natural resources, but the villagers are losing the water that was the basis for their traditional life. For various reasons Cibi becomes a wanderer, leaves his homeland and travels to the top of the world seeking the source of water. Cibi and the other characters come to realize that water is essential and should not be taken for granted...that water binds all life together, that crimes against water are crimes against humanity and that by adopting this thinking we as a human race can begin the journey toward peace and unity.

Tyler: How, I understand you've visited Tibet. Will you tell us about that visit and why it had such an impact on you?

How: Since childhood I have read about Tibet and imagined it to be a place of mystery and magic. As a teen I studied Buddhism and had a natural affinity for and understanding of its sometimes illusive concepts. Learning about the exceptional Dalai Lama and the nature of Tibetan wisdom captivated my imagination. At the same time the Chinese oppression and control scared me and made me think that the 'old' Tibet is slipping away. And being the roof of the world with the world's highest mountains added to the allure.

So I decided that if I was going to ever visit Tibet I should do it soon. We arranged a trip to meet with a small group in Kathmandu, Nepal (the travel company procured a group visa) and flew with our mountain bikes to Lhasa, Tibet. Immediately off the plane we were greeted by Chinese soldiers and shortly after drove into the city. The first afternoon in Lhasa at the Barkor market we were approached by some Tibetan students who pointedly told us not to believe the Chinese authorities, that life with the Chinese was dangerous and miserable and that the Chinese were enslaving and torturing the Tibetan people.

For three days we visited cultural sites and monasteries around Lhasa, then over the next two and a half weeks we mountain biked across Tibet over six Himalayan passes camping by small Tibetan villages, visiting monasteries and Everest (Chomolungma) Base Camp. At each camp we had dozens of Tibetan children (and some adults) come to visit and 'talk' with us. I was amazed at the determination and resilience of the (poverty-stricken) people yet scared and angry at the Chinese cruelty and domination. They all longed for the Dalai Lama and several showed us (highly illegal) pictures that they treasured of him.

Somewhere deep inside I connected with the Tibetans and they with me. I had monks at monasteries come up to me and hug me and we communicated deeply beyond the boundaries of our cross-language ignorance. Shortly after returning from Tibet the scheme and images of "Changing History" began to materialize.

Tyler: “Changing History” book examines how we are all interconnected, recalling the six degrees of separation theory. What message do you wish to get across to the reader by showing the interconnections between people?

How: Basically we are all the same and will live and die as a race. We are intimately connected to all that has occurred before and to all that will occur in the future. We have tremendous power through our present actions to change the past (a difficult to understand and subtle concept which is explored in the final chapter One Wheel) and make the future. You cannot separate us from the past, the future, our planet or the stars. We exist backwards and forwards in time and in many ways we never die. These connections bring with them great responsibility for our actions. Fundamentally we are all World Citizens and to change our history of hatred and violence we must embrace that concept in all that we do.

Tyler:How, on your website, the book is described as “stark.” Yet the book is called “Changing History.” Is stark an appropriate word to define the tone of the book?

How: I am trying to pare down the preconceptions, personal ambitions and illusions about what it means to be human and am left with a view of humanity that is bare with no ornaments, fluff or frills.

Tyler:How, what is the significance of the title “Changing History”?

How: “Changing History” is about our responsibility and power to mitigate and modify the effects of the past and create the future through our present actions.

Tyler: How, besides Chaucer, do you have any other literary influences?

How: I have been heavily influenced by philosophers and writers from the distant past including Plato/Socrates, Homer, Sappho and Boethius... and more recently Thoreau, Emily Dickinson and the Russian novelists including Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and from the twentieth century writers Kafka, Camus and Sartre, and American writers Kerouac, Ginsberg, Abbey and Vonnegut. I have great respect for Paulo Coelho and his ability to write engaging stories that speak across nations, religions and races and for Howard Zinn and his attempts to bring light to historical perspectives that run contrary to the typical stories of control and power.

Tyler: What is your view of the future. Do you believe the future will be positive? Many of the writers you list as influences are known for their rather negative and existentialist philosophies? Do you think ultimately humanity will improve itself?

How: There are many reasons to have a negative outlook on the world situation. That has surely been part of my experience. The world is controlled by those with money and power, and they have no plans of giving away or sharing that power.

On the other hand, I believe, along with the existentialists, that we have the power to decide what to do with our lives. I am a fervent believer in the value of and need for personal expression and creativity, which provides the potential to do great things and improve ourselves. Thus the conflict.

And I believe that the process of realizing the relationships that connect us is the path to a positive future. Change comes to each person individually. My purpose in writing this book is to help people question our place in the world and in history, and to ponder what it means to be World Citizens. I believe that only by moving away from our ancient and repeating group conflicts to a realization of our total connectedness can we create a world that benefits all of humanity.

Tyler: How, what is next for you? Do you plan to write any more books?

How: I am in the process of going to the publisher with a companion version of “Changing History” for young adults. I have been told that these ideas are important for all thinking people and perhaps especially young adults. I am also trying to arrange translations of the novel into multiple languages. The stories and messages are global and I want to reach out to people and cultures around the world.

And I am in the process of beginning work on another novel that centers on a specific character, a naturalist, in a specific setting who takes a micro viewpoint of humans, nature and history... sort of “Changing History” turned within.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, How. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they can find there about “Changing History”?

How: www.Changing-History.com contains a book synopsis, bio, character sketches, chapter summaries, info about readings, reviews, a press release, a hot-linked downloadable advert poster, an author contact form and links to websites related to Tibet and Asia. The site is regularly updated and will soon have “Changing History” philosophy and poetry pages, poetry recordings and a link to an author blog about world events related to themes from the book.

Tyler: Thank you, How. I hope reading your book will inspire people and bring about change for the history of the future.

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