

Interview with Thor Polson, author of *Childsong*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Thor Polson, who is here to talk about his new book “Childsong”.

Thor Polson was born in Kansas City, Missouri but traveled as a child with his family to India and Norway. He has received many degrees in languages, notably an M. A. in Latin from the University of Illinois in Urbana, an M. A. in Ancient Greek from the University of Missouri in Columbia, and an M. A. in German from Middlebury College in Vermont and its program in Mainz, Germany. He has taught classical and modern languages at numerous schools and colleges in the United States, particularly in Minnesota, and he holds an additional graduate degree in Ancient Greek from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Thor is also a pianist who has taught music and worked as a professional musician in the Twin Cities. As if those talents were not enough, he has now written a novel, “Childsong”, which he is here to discuss.

Tyler: Welcome, Thor. I’m happy that you could join me today. To begin, will you tell us about the basic concept behind “Childsong”?

Thor: Thanks for the interview, Tyler. “Childsong” is about a group of first-year students at a small liberal-arts college in the Midwest who all eventually self-destruct because of their selfish, Me-Generation attitude. Ultimately, the novel is about the troubled years of adolescence and early adulthood, and it’s only by tapping into something much larger than himself that the main character, Tommy Pendoro, is able to find redemption in hope and compassion. It’s only through his love of poetry that he can finally rise above his egotism.

Tyler: Thor, you’ve apparently spent a lot of time at colleges, and the novel is set at one. Is there any particular college that’s depicted in your book?

Thor: No, not really. I was an undergraduate at Grinnell College in Iowa, but with the exception of the actual physical layout of the campus, the similarity ends there for the most part. Flanders College is a far cry from Grinnell.

Tyler: Does the book draw on your own college experiences as a student?

Thor: Yes, but it can be considered more accurately as a distillation of everything that I both experienced and could have experienced as a college student. I finished college in the middle of the academic year, and I started writing the novel in the dead of winter while living with two friends in an old ramshackle house in Grinnell. I had money in the bank and no debts, so I didn't feel any need to find a job right away. The impressions of college were fresh (and in fact ongoing), and I was now in full possession of the verbal skills necessary to express them. It seemed like the perfect time to begin writing.

Tyler: What does the book's title refer to? Why did you choose it?

Thor: I can best answer that question in a roundabout way. There's a short piece called "Twelve" by the Viennese author Peter Altenberg. A beautiful young girl is fishing at a lake resort, catches a fish, and leaves it to die on the bank instead of throwing it back into the water. There are several guests sitting nearby, and an older woman comments sharply on the girl's insensitive behavior.

What Altenberg is trying to convey is the fact that the girl hasn't acted consciously, but rather that obliviousness is a characteristic of adolescence and that the older woman's compassion ultimately stems from her sense of mortality, her own as well as that of all living creatures, and more specifically from her awareness of the mortality of all hopes and dreams. The young girl, on the other hand, has no real understanding of death, and for that reason Altenberg steps out of the narrative at the end and directly encourages her to enjoy the beauty of her blissful ignorance as long as she possibly can.

In other words, compassion presupposes an awareness of mortality, and we finally leave childhood behind us, I think, when that insight has fully registered. That's simply part of the human condition, and that makes all of the characters in "Childsong" understandable, if not sympathetic.

Tyler: That's interesting, Thor, because you began by referring to the Me Generation, which makes the characters sound selfish. Are you saying that members of that generation aren't selfish but innocent?

Thor: Perhaps a better term for that attitude is "egoism", though that can also certainly include the far more active and universal quality of egotism involved in every generation's attempt to egotize the world, or to shape the world in its own image. In other words, it's impossible to be too critical of one particular generation, including my own. Quite honestly, and I can refer again to Altenberg's insight, I think that the more neutral term "obliviousness" best sums up the concept of youth in general, and I include my own among anyone else's. I was terribly thoughtless at that age, though not entirely so. This isn't meant to be a categorical statement.

I don't think that innocence and obliviousness are mutually exclusive. In any case, what sets more recent generations apart from older ones is the fact that we now have far more leisure time than before. A potential and positive result of that is more time for reflection, while a far more negative result is the extreme emphasis in our society on consumption, a constant distraction. A character in my novel sums that up as follows: "Live, buy, consume, die." We're bombarded with that message on a daily basis.

Has life been fundamentally improved since my parents' day? No, it's only been accelerated, and we're still just as mortal as they were.

Tyler: Tell us about the main character Tommy Pendoro. Is he a typical college student in your opinion?

Thor: This is where I think that a writer is in the worst possible position to describe his own writing, but I'll do my best. No, I wouldn't call Pendoro a typical college student, but only inasmuch as he's extremely contemplative. He's certainly swept along by everything that happens around him, but he sees it for what it is from the very beginning and is eventually able to transcend it. I can easily identify myself with the Pendoro character, but he's not an alter ego. He's simply a mouthpiece.

The final section of the book is written from Pendoro's perspective and contains both the climax and the denouement of the narrative, the climax in that the first genuine act of compassion occurs on the very last page, and the denouement in that the tone is so retrospective and melancholy. There are glimmers of compassion in all of the characters, but it's first fully realized in the Pendoro character. Through compassion comes hope, and through hope come self-redemption and even transfiguration.

Tyler: Can you explain exactly what you mean by compassion? Are the characters not capable of compassion prior to college?

Thor: I don't want to leave that impression at all. Of course they are. For example, I once taught a ninth-grade student who had nearly died after contracting Lyme disease, and this close brush with death gave him a depth of understanding far beyond that of most of his classmates. His was more pronounced, but like any other human characteristic, elements of compassion exist in all of us from infancy onwards.

I can answer this question by once again referring to Altenberg. Compassion presupposes an awareness of mortality, and that comes with the passing of years and an ever-developing sensitivity to the pain of others. That can exist at any age, however. I'll always remember, for example, how my piano students, all children, reacted to the death of my mother. They were extremely sympathetic, not perhaps to her death as such, but certainly to my sorrow, and I was touched beyond words by their kindness and concern.

Human beings are clearly fascinated by their own mortality, but there's nothing very edifying about the fact that any genuine confrontation with death is normally pushed to the margins of this society and that such a high premium is placed on youth for its own sake. (Donald Fagen's sarcasm comes to mind: "We'll be eternally free, yes, and eternally young.") On the other hand, that attitude is completely understandable in that the hope of humanity obviously resides in its young. It's simply a question of degree.

Tyler: What is there about the college experience of the characters, or about college students in general, that transforms their "Me" attitude into a more compassionate outlook?

Thor: I would say that it's independence combined with intense socialization. In college we're compelled to confront human behavior both abstractly and concretely, and when through poor decisions we occasionally hurt ourselves and those around us, or when by accident or design we're inevitably hurt by others, we're confronted even at that early age with the never-ending choice between callousness and compassion. Compassion can be a far more difficult road to follow, but in any case, life is a constant tightrope act, a choice between staying sensitive enough to feel and hard enough to cope, a lifelong walk across the razor's edge. The characters in the novel tend to trample all over each other, but they're certainly intelligent enough to be aware of the adverse effects of their actions. In that awareness lies hope.

Tyler: There have been many coming-of-age novels written in the past. Can you credit any other novels as influences for you in writing "Childsong"?

Thor: The book has been compared by several readers to Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye", so there must be something to that, perhaps in Pendoro's bewildered innocence. I went through a Joyce phase in my late teens and early twenties, so there must be at least a touch of Stephen Dedalus in the Pendoro characterization, though Pendoro's thought processes are far less abstruse. Certainly, Joyce's meticulous craftsmanship and penchant for the fantastic had an enormous influence on me. I also see occasional bits of Faulkner in the use of diction and in some of the stream-of-consciousness sections. His fragmentary approach to narrative—in "The Sound and the Fury", for example—no doubt affected the writing, though I prefer to call it kaleidoscopic in this particular case.

Finally, I'm sure that I've also been influenced by Homer's "Odyssey" since that's my favorite piece of literature. If Odysseus represents an Everyman, then so does Pendoro.

Tyler: What other ancient or modern foreign authors have continued to influence you?

Thor: Almost too many to mention. Certainly the classical Greco-Roman literary canon and countless German authors, more specifically Kafka and Hesse. I also have to mention Pasternak's Zhivago figure. To Zhivago, life is an ongoing and at times relentless metaphor, and that's true of any artist.

Tyler: We are now having a very literary discussion, but would you describe your novel as literary? Will it appeal to the average college-age person, or whom do you envision your readers as being?

Thor: I'd do best by quoting my publisher at Athena Press: "It is certainly not mainstream material, but it should attract a readership, even if this is something of a 'cult' following." Yes, the novel is literary, but I would like to think that any extra effort on the reader's part will be amply rewarded in the end. As I subjected the text to countless revisions, I often thought of a mother bear endlessly licking its cubs after birth. In other words, so much love and crafting went into this book that a fully appreciative reader will have to love the English language as much as I do. Any reader also needs to understand that, although I've adopted a decidedly Latinate tone for this interview, the novel itself can be very gritty at times. As I've said elsewhere, everything exists on a spectrum, and

the sublime must be balanced by the base. I try to make use of the language at every conceivable register.

Tyler: What do you think makes “Childsong” stand out from other novels about young people?

Thor: More than anything else, it offers compassion as one of the few means of surviving a very turbulent period in our lives. Of course, self-absorption and adolescence go hand in hand, and in many ways that attitude can be seen as a retreat from a very confusing world, but in the end it’s a bottomless spiral with no prospect of personal growth. Perhaps that makes the book didactic or moralistic, but if so, that message is subtle. It’s not as if I want to foist my world view on the reader or on anyone, for that matter. My sole intention was to convey beauty.

Tyler: But when the reader finishes the book, what do you hope will be the response? Do you want the reader to do something differently or to feel or understand something better?

Thor: This will sound odd, I’m sure, but I still can’t read the last few pages of the novel without getting choked up. Why? Because after all of the turbulence in the previous chapters, we finally experience an act of pure, unguarded emotion, and this relates ultimately to the title “Childsong”. I’ve spent the better part of my life working with children, and what has always appealed to me most about them is their spontaneity and unapologetic candor. We finally see this quality in its full beauty at the very end of the novel.

Tyler: I’m very intrigued by your affinity for learning languages. Do you think your skills in learning foreign languages have sharpened your writing in English?

Thor: Most definitely so. I always tell people that I first mastered English, my own language, as an undergraduate, and that was due to the fact that I immersed myself in its literature. I was also exposed to Latin as my first foreign language, and in the following years this led in turn to some lengthy stretches of time spent learning other languages, namely Latin, Ancient Greek, German, French, and Norwegian. My interest in the first three eventually led to graduate degrees in those languages since I felt such a strong need to seclude myself in order to focus on the task at hand. In most cases, and for obvious reasons where the ancient languages were concerned, I only acquired a strong reading proficiency, and I obviously haven’t been able to maintain all of them because of the time commitment involved. French and Norwegian, for example, have long since fallen by the wayside.

I’ve gotten away from your question, Tyler. Yes, language-learning has most definitely sharpened my writing skills, and perhaps the best way of explaining that is by making a comparison: We can all appreciate a well-made building, but it’s only when a master architect explains exactly what went into its making that we can begin to appreciate it more, and that’s only the beginning. It’s only when we actually apply what we’ve learned and have set aside the many years necessary to hone that skill that we can finally appreciate that building fully. In the same way, I’ve been able to ground myself through other languages in the architecture of my own language, English, and if in improvising I choose to violate any of its conventions, as I do freely in my novel, I do that consciously and in full knowledge of the tradition.

I would like to add that what troubles me about the current condition of the English language is the fact that it seems to be changing largely through neglect and not by design. A mistake—and by “mistake” I mean some form of imprecision—is made, gets disseminated, and eventually becomes the norm. For me, this subject always evokes the image of a sharp tool being slowly blunted by careless usage. More attention could be paid in our schools to the study of our language’s structure, and what I really miss sometimes is a passion for, or even simply an active interest in, the nuts and bolts of verbal expression. I enjoy iconoclasm, but successful and lasting iconoclasm can’t exist in a vacuum. John Coltrane, for example, was completely steeped in the tradition before he finally transcended it.

To me, any form of human expression, be it verbal, musical, graphic, or otherwise, is something sacred and for that reason something to be nurtured and cherished. It’s what makes us human.

Tyler: You’ve familiarized yourself with both ancient and modern languages, and you’ve done a lot of traveling as a result. Has this understanding of other cultures and literatures also helped you as a novelist in terms of plot and character development?

Thor: Continuing to be exposed to other cultures and literatures has had an immense effect on my writing insofar as it has provided me with a definite context for the culture and literature of any given time period. In other words, it has allowed me to see a period as part of a continuum. As for plot and character development in particular, continued exposure has simply made me aware of many more models that I can use as bases for my own particular twist on the eternal.

What has helped me the most in this respect, I think, is the fact that I’ve worked a lot of blue-collar jobs (landscaping, groundskeeping, construction, etc.), not to mention my work as a musician. I’ve been fortunate enough to meet so many different types of people in my life, and despite all of my formal education, I don’t really consider myself to be an academician at heart.

Tyler: Has being a teacher helped you gain some extra perspective in understanding college students?

Thor: Not really, though teaching college students has always reminded me of how young we are at that age. This view is at least partly a function of my growing older, I’m sure.

Tyler: Thor, I understand you are working on a couple more books. Will you tell us a little about them?

Thor: I’m currently working on a translation of two collections of short pieces by Franz Kafka, “A Country Doctor” and “A Hunger Artist”. After that I have two novels in mind: “Katabasis”, a historical novel based on the life of Xenophon, and “Brothers”, a novel dealing with the lives of two or three brothers as described by their children, their wives, their friends, and themselves. I also hope to get my M. Phil. thesis published by a publisher in Italy. It’s a commentary on Xenophon’s “Apology”, which will serve at least partly as a basis for the novel mentioned above.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Thor. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information may be found there about “Childsong”?

Thor: It's full of information, actually, and any potential reader can find the following there: complete comments written by independent reviewers, a plot summary, an excerpt, an additional interview, and contact information. The address is www.thorpolson.com.

Thanks for the interview, Tyler. It's been a great pleasure.

Tyler: Thank you, Thor. I've enjoyed the opportunity to interview you, and I wish you much luck with "Childsong".

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