

# Postcard Translations: The fictions and facts of Frank Davey

By HOWARD KAMAN

"The postcard is a system for disguising memory," writes Frank Davey in his recently published collection of prose-poems, *Postcard Translations*.

Like his 1986 *Abbotsford Guide to India*, the book combines reflection and satire on often unexplored elements in life. Davey challenges the reader to think about how we look at different aspects of the world. Whereas *Abbotsford* pokes fun at travel guides and their writing style, *Postcard Translations* does what its title states — it reads between the lines of the postcard's banality.

Davey, who has been at York since 1970, is currently the English Department Chairman. He has written over twenty books of poetry and literary criticism. Through his creative works — like *Weeds and Arcana* — he has become a fixture in the alternative publishing scene. In 1984, Davey broke new ground with the opening of *Swiftcurrent*, "the world's first on-line," available to any computer user with a modem and telephone.

Excalibur writer Howard Kaman recently talked to Davey about his books and about writing in general.

Your books often deal with power, and the conflicts that surround it. What influence do you see politics having on writing?

I think that writing not only is inevitably political — inasmuch that anybody who does writing communicates a political attitude — it may be passivity, it may be acquiescence, it may be anger, it may be rebellion.

But, in addition, I think the thing we need to write about is power relations. What the world faces, whether it be in family quarrels or at summit meetings, is problems in power relations, problems in how power is perceived. You can't get away from the fact that there are power disparities, and so there's always a problem in society of how to manage these disparities, and how to manage their consequences.

A lot of my work illuminates the existence of these power disparities. People take them for granted because they're comfortable with

them, and people who have power are very comfortable, so they think of it as the natural state of affairs. They don't think of it as a power relationship — they think of it as the way the world is, or, even perhaps, the way the world should be.

Then can good poetry alter opinions and influence people's political point of view?

I think there's always the suggestion for change. But I think I see change as something people do after they identify a problem.

Your books have all been printed by small, alternative publishers. (i.e. *Postcard Translations* by *Underwood Editions*, and *Abbotsford Guide* by *Press Porcepic*). Why have you stayed away from large, mainstream publishers?

I've tried to avoid that because I've seen writers get co-opted by the mainstream publishers in a very subtle way. They have to write what the publishers say. I'm not exactly sure how that works . . . There's a way in which mainstream publishing creates the kinds of texts it needs to publish.

Do you think you write for a particular market?

Yes, but I guess I don't think of it as a market; I think of it as readers. "Market" suggests "consumers," and when you think of readers as consumers, you are thinking of them as passive recipients. I tend to see my readers as people who have an active engagement with the text, who read it differently from how I would read it.

A lot of writers see their craft as a form of catharsis. Do you look at your own writing as therapeutic, or as a way of getting ideas across?

Not really, no. Writing, for me, is making things. (seeing writing as catharsis) seems a very narrow way of looking at it, pretty self-serving. It sort of runs counter to the notion of writing as communication. Now, there are people out there — these

are passive readers — who might enjoy reading of someone else's self-importance. In other words, a weak reader would look for a strong, arrogant writer.

Your writings have all been in poetry and literary criticism. Why not try your hand at fiction?

Whenever you're involved with writing, you're making up a code system for your feelings. Sometimes it's more convenient to feel one thing than another.

So, fiction and non-fiction are really one and the same?

Yeah, I wouldn't want to agree to a hard and fast separation between fiction and non-fiction. You know, you and I are fictions; we have agreed within ourselves on personalities — we have made up the way we treat the world, the things that we do. We have made this personality up within certain limits. That is to say, if you and I were born in China the cultural possibilities would have been quite different. We would have the same genetic make-up, but we would appear to be different people.

You seem to be very interested in communication between writer and reader. What sparked the idea for *Swiftcurrent*, the on-line literary magazine?

I've always been interested in using publication frameworks as ways of keeping artists in contact with one another, to allow communication and collaboration. I got involved in publishing a magazine in the sixties called *Tish*. The idea was not so much to showcase the work being published, as to establish communication with other writers in the country so that there could be an exchange of ideas.

When computer technology came around, a number of us were interested in the possibility of establishing a magazine on a 5 1/4" diskette and simply duplicating, say, a hundred of the diskettes and sending them out to

a hundred people, and this would be the magazine.

The people would run the diskette on their machine, look at the files there, add responses or other things to it, and send a copy of it back. You could have a magazine that could be exchanged. There were problems, however: people don't all have the same brand of microcomputer, or wordprocessor. Also, I couldn't see why mailing diskettes was any better than mailing paper.

When did the idea of an electronic bulletin board originate?

This (the disk exchange) was before there were bulletin board systems. After discarding that idea, we decided to hook up a bulletin board system, but on a national basis — to have a very sophisticated system which would offer places where there

could be poetry, short stories, novel chapter or book reviews posted. It would be an opportunity for people to log onto the system from all over the country and read and respond to what was there.

Although you have published in magazines, most of your work appears in book form. Why?

I think I work with the book, as a unit, because it's the machine for presenting the text to the reader. That is, I don't work much with periodical publications, in part because my writing doesn't excerpt all that well. If you take something out of a book structure you lose the context, you lose a lot of the interconnectedness of the text. I also think I like working on that scale. I like writing texts that have that interconnectedness.

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Public Enemy	<i>It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back</i>	Def Jam
C The Plasterscene Replicas	<i>Raining</i>	
Happy Flowers	<i>I Crush Bozo</i>	Homestead
Eric B & Rakim	<i>Follow The Leader</i>	UNI
My Dad Is Dead	<i>Let's Skip The Details</i>	Homestead
Various Artists	<i>Golden Throats</i>	Rhino
The Texas Instruments	<i>Sun Tunnels</i>	RabidCat
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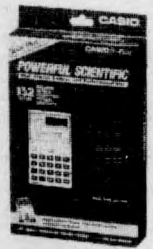
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