

From A to Z: An Interview with Josh Medsker on His Encyclopedia-Inspired Project

by Meaghan Quinn



Josh Medsker is an interesting guy. I was virtually introduced to Medsker through his anonymous chapbook series called Twenty-Four Hours—a short collection of three anonymous chapbooks

(www.twentyfourhours.com).

He's baptized his current project Medskerpedia, a project that has empowered him to write 1,600 poems in a span of just two years.

I knew going into this interview that a fascinating literary journey was ahead of me.

As I Facebook messaged him in the wee hours of the night, it became clear that Medsker is an average person with heroic ambitions. He writes to the rhythm of his own pen, a trait best embodied by a recent selfie he posted, in which he looks dead-pan into the iPhone camera. His scrubby beard is full of charmed secrets, black-rimmed glasses slipping down the bridge of his

nose, and the best part of all, a white hamster sits perched atop his shoulder, posing for the pic. Aside from being wildly fearless to take on Medskerpedia, Medsker is a dog-loving, guitar-strumming bibliophile who hails from the tundra of Alaska and somehow ended up teaching English lit in what he calls a "gritty city" in Jersey City.

Meaghan Quinn: Can you describe the genesis of *Medskerpedia*?

Josh Medsker: Every day I read an entry from the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, and afterwards I write a poem that is in some way related to that topic. Some have been directly related and some have been very abstractly related. For example, the other day I had "Anglo-Saxon Prosody" so I took a selection from *Beowulf* and modeled my poem off of that. It has taught me some pretty interesting things about the writing process in general and my own process specifically. I'll have about 1600 poems when I'm done. It's going to take me until the summer of 2019. Whew.

MQ: For me, the writing process is slow. Oh, so very slow. I am lucky if I average a poem every three weeks. And then I toy with it, tinker and erase, switch forms and swap images. For me, the revision process is relentless, and so as a writer, I most wanted to know how you stay engaged and move forward to the next prompt, given that you simply have no

time to fuss over the futility of a period versus a semi-colon. What is driving you, right now, to finish this project?

JM: I guess fear is always driving me. But after talking to some writer friends of mine, they convinced me that keeping going on the project, and not some self-imposed deadline, was the most important thing. I would like to hit 300 poems by July 22nd though. But to fully answer your question, curiosity is driving me the most these days. The sheer variety of these encyclopedia entries is fascinating and scary and keeps me from leaning back on my pet obsessions.

MQ: The act of writing is solitary. It is an interior process, sitting with one's thoughts, breaking open the cocoons of memory, engaging with the universal, and all the while, the oppressive blank page stares back, unyielding. Upon writing your first entries for your "encyclopedia," you, too, felt stifled by the silence of the screen and chose to open up this idea to others using a private Facebook page. What is the Facebook group and why did you want to create a virtual writing group? Can you share a mission statement or overall purpose of the group?

JM: The Facebook group is where we post our poems, and critiques of the poems. We don't have a defined mission statement. Just to show up, kick ass, and leave it all on the page. It's turned into a real tight core group of ten or so, with others chiming in now and again. When I started *Medskerpedia*, I was originally going to just post my work on a secret website, so only I could see it. A lot of publishers balk at work

published on personal blogs and social media, and consider it previously published. After a few days I got bored doing it by myself, so I decided to create a secret Facebook group instead, to make it more community-oriented. It's really made all the difference, in my mind. Sharing our writing is wonderful, very encouraging and useful. We critique each other's work as well.

MQ: Using the Facebook platform, you post a topic or a form, and the other members are encouraged to write work based off of the given topic. You are currently working through the C's: Chiasmus, Chicano poetry, Chilean poetry, Chinese ancient poetry. As the variety of your writing prompts continue to grow, so has the readership and the contributors to the project. At this very moment, *Medskerpedia* has 109 members with more members knocking at your virtual door every week. What makes your writing prompts and poem sharing special? Why should writers engage your project over others?

JM: I would say that the sheer variety of topics sets us apart. I'm a big fan of teaching yourself to do something through trial and error, and *Medskerpedia* offers plenty of opportunities. Another neat thing about *Medskerpedia* is the length of this project. And, as I was saying before, the people involved are stellar individuals, very supportive, and smart as hell. We have a bunch of risk-takers in the group, and I'm always floored by the work they produce. I think maybe the thing that pleases me the most is that there will

be a definite end to the project. That gives it more value, I think.



and Medskerpedia as the project evolves. The second of three interviews will appear in the Spring 2017 issue of the magazine, and all three interviews will eventually be posted on our website.

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This is not a new concept, this idea of writing under time constraints. However, Medskerpedia is by far the largest and perhaps, the boldest, of its kind. Furthermore, most poets will not write 1,600 poems in a lifetime, let alone in a two-year window. What Medsker is doing may sound impossible to some, but at the same time, no one can deny it is a noble feat. In pursuit of my own poetry production expectations, I recently signed up for Tupelo Press' 30/30 Project for the month of July. Although thirty poems in thirty days sounds challenging and overwhelming at times, I can look to Medskerpedia as a guiding light to seize the day, to find the poems all around, and to write even when the words are hard to discern among the dissonance of daily life. For those of you interested in cheering on or even contributing to Medsker's encyclopedia-inspired prompts, you are encouraged to find him on Facebook and send him a message, so that he can add you to the private group. Also, stay tuned, as we at TTR continue on this journey with Medsker