Michael Martone
In Conversation with Bret Nye

Michael Martone is the author of more than fifteen books of fiction, nonfiction, and all manner of hybridities between our genres. His recent publications include a collaborative anthological effort with a number of other Hoosier and Midwestern writers, Winesburg, Indiana *(Break Away Books: Indiana University Press), which he co-edited with Bryan Furuness;* The Blue Guide to Indiana*, a faux travel guide of Indiana landmarks (FC2);* Michael Martone*, a collection of contributor's notes written* about *the author* by *the author (FC2);* Double-Wide*, a compendium of his early short fiction (IU Press); and* Racing in Place*, a collection of essays (University of Georgia Press). His work has been published in* Harper's*,* Esquire*,* Bomb*,* Iowa Review*, and* Denver Review*, amongst many other places. He currently is a professor of creative writing at The University of Alabama, where he has taught since 1996.*

This interview was conducted in a fortuitously empty classroom at the University of Notre Dame on the morning of October 8, 2015.

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NDR: *Your newest book,* Winesburg, Indiana, *which you read from last night (University of Notre Dame MFA Reading on October 7, 2015, at Hammes Bookstore) is a very interesting project. I was wondering how it came about. You mentioned that Bryan Furuness from Butler first approached you with it?*

MM: Bryan is the editor of *Booth* magazine, an online and print magazine. I have a long running connection with Butler, and it's recently become an MFA program. And Bryan went to Warren Wilson and I teach there, and he knows my work. I've written a lot of satires and parodies, you know, camouflages, disguises, so Bryan came up with the idea that I might do a parody of the memoir, particularly those extreme memoirs, but I was thinking that they're too out there already, so sensational that it would be hard to make a satire of them. I thought that maybe we could do something different, and because of my long-running interest in Indiana, and because of *Winesburg, Ohio*, and because I'm a short story writer by nature, I began to wonder: what if we created a small town in Indiana, contemporary Indiana, and peopled it with very desperate and emotional and sad people like in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and have them tell mini-memoirs instead? Also, this way I could do it in a series for the online version of *Booth*. That's how it started—I was just going to write four or five characters telling one- to two-page memoirs.

It evolved into what it is now because I was trying to get Indiana University to create and sustain a series of literary texts that ended up being called Break Away Books. I mentioned to them that I was working on this project and that I had the idea to ask other Indiana and Midwestern writers to contribute, and then it became an anthology. At first it was a short story collection of mine, and then it became an anthology of other people's writing in addition, so it became a hybrid of those two things.

NDR: *What made you decide to expand what began as your own story collection into a collaborative effort with the other writers involved in the anthology?*

MM: It has to do with my evolving idea about the collapse of the prevailing model of publication. My first book was published with a commercial publisher in the 1980s, but ever since then I've been publishing in a variety of forms as that model collapsed, and the internet and that very high-powered, typesetting machine called the computer came into its own. I tried to roll with that. Another thing that's happened since then would be the rise of creative writing programs. The whole notion of the writer as a solitary, independent genius just didn't make sense to me anymore, technically or

professionally. I was doing many more collaborative things than that model allows. It has to do with what the French postmodern theorists were saying, that even when you write it's the collaboration between the writer and the reader that makes the meaning of the text. That all led to me coming to this different idea of what publishing is. In the old way, you write something, you send it off to these gatekeepers of culture that decide if it's good or bad, if they'll put their money behind it and create the book. Now *everybody* has the tools to make books. Publishing almost feels like community-organizing now, in a way. It shows up at the AWP conference, too. All these writers are there, but a lot of them have their own small presses, they work for magazines, and they're all readers. This is in opposition to the old model where there's a writer, an agent, a publisher, an editor. Now we as writers have to do all of those things ourselves because that old model that kept those categories solid has started to sort of wither away.

So with the book *Winesburg, Indiana* we had a fake community already in place, and I decided to put together a fake community of writers to go with it.

NDR: Winesburg, Indiana *definitely mimics Anderson's* Winesburg, Ohio *in terms of the variation between the stories and the anthology feel, though you've mentioned that your collaborators didn't have a lot of information about the town at their disposal other than knowing where the story would be set when they were asked to contribute a piece of their own.*

MM: Often the contributors were given some other piece of writing from the book, but there wasn't any strict thing I asked them to adhere to. The way we now think about the original *Winesburg* is that it was the first American book of stories that created what we now take for granted as a *character*. A character that has deep structure, coming out of the then new ideas in psychoanalysis. You had buried traumas inside characters that were acted out at times of emotional strain and stress and then recorded within the story. What a fictional creation, I often think, the idea of the subconscious, the unconscious. Of course, psychiatry has no interest in that anymore, they think our problems come from an imbalance of chemicals, but English departments are still interested in these character narratives invented a hundred years ago. One of the things I wanted to do was have the book represent the end result of one hundred years of thinking about character in that way.

And then some of the critique of the book is that the characters in *Winesburg, Indiana* aren't like Anderson's characters, but maybe *we're* not

like that anymore, maybe the metaphor of the subterranean character no longer works, maybe we're actually more surface-like. I wanted the book to mimic *Winesburg* in its connectivity, but perhaps also critique that connectivity, in that it might be an idea that's no longer viable to us.

NDR: *That makes me think of much of your work on the Midwest and Indiana in particular, of which there exists quite a bit. As you mentioned, in Anderson's model, in his development of psychological realism in American literature, there's the constant striving for depth. But then, of course, there are a lot of existing caricatures and stereotypes that exist in Midwestern writing even now; it's almost its own aesthetic. In your own work, do you find that you like to play with both modes or do you have a preference?*

MM: I think I've finally come down on the side of psychological realism being played out for me. It's never been interesting for me. It has to do with living in Indiana, the Midwest. People call it *flatness*. It's strange to think that I grew up on a big, flat plain. What's interesting to me is not so much the depth, but the surface. What does fiction and character look like if you're working mostly with surface? I suppose today we often call this caricature. So in that sense, yes, I'm more interested in working with plot and structure and allegory than I am in working with character, which I think many other people are still invested in exploring. I think it has do with having lived in Indiana, being intrigued by the deadpan flatness of things that look very non-reflective, in both senses of the word.

NDR: *At this point, you've lived in the South for almost twenty years, and you've produced a lot of writing about Indiana since you've been there.*

MM: I'd say that's because my formative years took place in Indiana, for one. Also, I find that having a bounded space creates an infinite number of points inside of it that I can think about. And I'm still thinking about it. My next two books are both set in Indiana.

It's tougher down in Alabama, when you've got Flannery O'Connor on one side, Eudora Welty on the other, and there's Faulkner, all of this writing about the South. In Indiana, my progenitors are Dreiser or Vonnegut, maybe, but it's not the same. When I tell most people I'm writing about Indiana, they ask, why? But it frees you up to make Indiana literature anything you want.

NDR: *Do you think having distance from Indiana helps you to write about it?*

MM: Sure. And it's not only distance, but time. Time is a component of place. The distance also helps you look back in time, and then take that and bring it into a present moment. Most of what I write about is the frozen time period when I lived there, the fifties, sixties and seventies. Indiana is now, of course, totally changed.

NDR: *Your work is clearly interested in redefining the boundaries between fiction and creative nonfiction. Would you say that's true?*

MM: Definitely. I think there are two ways to be an artist: you can either identify with a certain genre, and study and learn and appreciate its various rules, and try to perfect those understood outcomes, or you can look at many different genres and get something out of confusing those genres. It's like the brothers Hermes and Apollo. Hermes makes the lyre, and Apollo is the one who can play it. So there's Apollo, who understands art and can perfect the sound of the instrument. But what interests me is Hermes's take; he looks at the category of dead animal parts, at tortoise shells, cow horns, catgut, and he can see it as another category, as a musical instrument. He can't play it perfectly, but he can take something that's not artistic and move it into another category and make it art. So I like to take something like the travel guide, or the contributor's note, and move them into other categories, make them literary works.

NDR: *Then it seems like context is supremely important in your writing. For example, you published the contributors' notes that now make up the book* Michael Martone *in the contributors' notes sections of the magazines they appear in, and there were the fake interviews you published, and other publications of that nature. Have you ever thought of yourself as a performance artist?*

MM: Actually, performance art really interests me. That's something that's not usually taught. It's never considered in the typical creative writing workshop, where you're taught to write something and publish it in a literary magazine and eventually in a book. We don't usually talk about that as a context in itself, how our writing might be seen differently and accepted differently depending on where it's published. We never empower the writer to have control over that. They automatically assume that it's not up to them, exactly where or how it's published. But now we're more and more involved in the context or framing of our own work, whether that's through negotiations with editors, or from publishing it ourselves.

NDR: *So when you publish something in a defamiliarized place, do you concern yourself with how an audience, maybe a first time reader, will approach that writing?*

MM: Well, I don't *worry* about it. But I do understand that if you're playing this game where you're moving between genres that people do need genres in order to be able to see something. So there's this animal that's got a duckbill, fur, webbed feet, it lays eggs, and it lactates. In a way you can't see that until someone says, okay, it's a *mammal*. Even though it straddles other categories. The danger comes when you come up with something outside or in between categories like that, and people don't know what to do with it. It'll probably happen with *Winesburg, Indiana*. Is it anthology, is it a story collection, what is it? There's always a risk when you're doing that, but that's not to blame the reader. You hope that they can get over that blindness and experience a kind of wonder or amazement at what you've made—my god, look at that platypus! Right now, I'm rethinking what animals are, what ducks are, what mammals are. That's the sweet spot, but of course the danger is that they might not see it at all, that they'll miss the wonder, but there's nothing you can do about, you just have to keep trying things.

There's an artist who makes miniature villages in sculpture. He has this idea that there's this other race of tiny people living among us. He puts the sculptures in random places in New York City. You can walk by and think they're just a pile of trash, but, if you look closely, you'll see it's this little sculpture village. How charming! I saw him do something in a museum once; there's art all around in the galleries, and in the stairwell he put a mini village. At first it just looked like the crap you sweep into a corner of a room, but I looked closer and then I realized it was one of those villages, which made it quite delightful, probably the most interesting work in the exhibit. Again, the danger is that it looked, at first glance, like a bunch of crap in the corner, even in the context of a museum where everything is supposed to be art. But as an artist who does this sort of thing, it's sort of fun, it's a hit or miss thing. You have to go with it.

NDR: *That sounds a bit like a mission statement for you, in continuing to come back to putting two genres together in your writing.*

MM: You used the word defamiliarization—we're all assuming the world is all settled. My job as an artist is to say, well, no. By putting things in categories, you aren't really seeing them, you're missing something. It's my job to get people to slow down, to stop glossing the world, to see the world for the

amazing, magical irreality that it is, which we can't do because we're often so focused on the categories. Gravity works, we know this, but how can I get you to imagine flying? It's a space of possibility that you open with this kind of work. The whole job of these types of genre confusions is to get people to think outside of the box, to create situations where the audience has to think outside of it in order to even see what's going on.

NDR: *One more question about genre. I wanted to ask you your thoughts about the novel. You've shown a clear preference for shorter fiction in your own work, which is, of course, entirely your decision. But there's this prevailing notion, for young writers coming up through creative writing programs even now, that in order to make the step into becoming a "professional" writer, you have to write a novel. It can be experimental, modernist, but it has to be a very long, very sustained work of fiction. I have a feeling you have some thoughts on this.*

MM: There are the genres of the novel or the collection or the short story, but success and failure are genres, too. You say, "I feel like I have to write a novel in order to be a success." Well, you can redefine success, too. I think of the thing we call the novel as a very voracious form. There are novels made up of letters, or menus; I don't think there really is a form that *is* the novel, except that it's a form that voraciously eats other forms. My teacher John Barth gave a reading once. Someone asked him, "Who are you reading now?", which is the question that someone in the audience always asks in order to see what the author is reading so they can find a shortcut to learning something about writing. They assume that writers are only reading important things. Barth was prepared for this question, so for his answer he opened up his satchel and pulled out a cereal box. He says, I read this this morning while I was eating cereal. He pulls out letters, his bills, composition papers from his freshman class, magazines—his point is that those are the things he is reading. All of this is important to a novelist. You don't read other novels to write your novel, you read everything because *anything* can go into a novel. There are no rules for writing a novel.

But there is the cultural thing, in which the "successful" novel becomes its own genre, the thing that critics want, which sends a message to aspiring writers that they need to make something like that successful novel. As a writer, I don't worry about that. I do books. I don't think of myself as a short story writer, or a short short story writer. I think of myself as a writer. And I also don't consider a hierarchy in where I publish. To me, publishing a very short piece in a magazine is no better or worse than publishing a hardback book.

NDR: *Earlier you mentioned that* Winesburg, Indiana *has been published by Break Away Books, through Indiana University Press. Maybe you could tell me a little more about this effort.*

MM: With the revolution of publishing, and the decline of the commercial model, my friends from Indiana and I have always wanted to have a return to the time one hundred years ago when Indiana was a kind of a hotbed of literary production, with Theodore Dreiser, James Whitcomb Riley, all that writing being done at the beginning of the 1900's. Now we have Action Books at Notre Dame, and Engine Books in Indianapolis, so we needed to involve the presses that already exist here in the state (at Indiana University, Notre Dame, and elsewhere) in publishing literary fiction and nonfiction and eventually poetry, and not just "academic work." It just seems like the right time. I think we have ten or twelve titles in print now, and a dozen more in the works.

And then we wanted to rethink what we use to call regionalism, which is something that has been discounted. The message from a book like *Winesburg Ohio* or Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, is that small-town life, rural Midwestern life is secondary to city life in Paris or New York City. I wanted to reconsider how regional literature can be defined as perhaps actually postmodern. I really hope that Break Away Books can help to define a new regional writing we might call "postmodern regionalism." As opposed to the old-fashioned realist regionalism of Bret Harte, Mark Twain, etc.

NDR: *That sounds so exciting. It helps to give a name to all this new work being done about Midwestern people and modes that doesn't fit those aging modes of strictly realist depictions of the Midwest. So is there a little bit of a regional bent to the stuff you're publishing through the press?*

MM: Yes, there's definitely an interest in that. In people who are from the region, or live here now, or are writing about issues of place. Region is an important category in our lives and identities. We know place is politically important, even though we don't usually think of ourselves as Hoosiers or Midwesterners first, when we consider ourselves. And maybe it shouldn't be the first thing we should think about, place as difference, but maybe we can at least throw it back into the mix. Most of the time we write about Indiana and we think we're producing a culture that's part of a national culture, but are we in a place where we can be happy about the regional culture that we're producing? Maybe we can start thinking about other types of groupings of culture, rather than only the national culture. And not just as a baby

culture that wants to be like the bigger, grown up national culture. Can a regional culture be unique, within the larger culture we call America?

NDR: *This sounds like a somewhat radical idea, talking about regional literature in that way nowadays.*

MM: But it did work in the South. There is a national idea called Southern Literature. We just hired a professor at The University of Alabama who specializes in southern studies. Why hasn't this sort of thing happened with the Midwest? So there is a model for regional literature, and that'd be the South, but can we do that in the Midwest?

NDR: *I wanted to ask you about the idea of the MFA program as it is now, seemingly the prevailing model for young people who want to be writers. And coming out of that, what do you think about residencies and fellowships, or even further programs (PhD in Creative Writing)? Are these things that you've taken part in? Do you think young writers should strive for these opportunities?*

MM: It seems to me that the PhD in creative writing makes an implied, if not explicit, agreement to make you nothing but a teacher in a university program, and I think that's where the competition comes into play. What I tell my MFA students is that I'm going to provide them with four years of time to write, four years of protected space, and that it's up to them what they'll end up doing with that time. I like the idea of an MFA being considered more like a fellowship, which is basically a time when you can decide what kind of writer you want to be. I'd like to de-emphasize as much as possible the training of people into teachers within the MFA program model. My students tell me they want to do the PhD, to continue to have that protected time and space to write, but I tell them I don't think the PhD will provide that, that instead they'll want to shape you into a particular thing.

I think the fellowships like the Stegner or the ones in Wisconsin and Provincetown are good, but again they're just protected time and space for you to sort things out. I think it would be a good thing if we could be less anxious, if we could stop thinking that the only way to support our writing is by teaching writing. Right now, that kind of patronage *is* perhaps the only thing in town, but the good news is that with the revolution of the internet and entertainment, there is so much writing that has to be done. We might be able to begin to think about other ways of being a writer other than just supporting it through teaching. My son worked freelance as a writer of video game booklets, which expand the narrative of the game and the expe-

rience of the person playing. There's also Hollywood, the writer's rooms for TV shows and movies. There are these possibilities in the culture to break out of the desperation involved in thinking that the only thing we can do to support our writing is to teach others to write. I don't want to say that creative writing programs should *teach* people to write movies—I mean to say that creative writing programs should give people space to figure out what they can do with their particular skill. We're not thinking creatively enough about what we can do with our particular talents of reading and writing.

NDR: *I think of the classic tales of writers going west, Nathanael West or F. Scott Fitzgerald, tales which always ended in misery, but it's very different now, isn't it?*

MM: It's not the way the world works now. There are so many outlets that need so much content. The whole idea that we have to specialize people to write in specialized forms just doesn't seem right anymore. The great thing about the Internet boom is the democratization of it. That's the world we swim in now. I like thinking about Facebook as art, too, whether it can be made into art. I wonder what we can do with writing and reading and these new machines at our disposal.

NDR: *I agree. I do think that a lot of writers, though, in hearing this might be worried that the work to be done at these professional venues might contaminate the purity of the artists's work. Do you think artists should think about compartmentalizing their writing, their time, or do you wonder if they should even want to do that?*

MM: Again, when I started, this was all new, the track to go into creative writing programs. John Barth told me if you go into university teaching, go into remedial English. He said teaching creative writing would be the thing that contaminates your work. Go in and teach basic grammar, he said, because at the end of the day you can walk home and not take it with you. You're just teaching gerunds. But if you go home from a workshop of twelve or so writers, you're using up a lot of your creative and writing energy. It might be the *worst* example for contaminating your own work, teaching poetry and fiction.

Maybe we should do what writers did before creative writing programs, work in advertising or public relations. We've since assumed the idea that literature is a genre or form opposed to advertising, but maybe we should cross genres. You're a writer. The university wants to specialize you, they

want you to be a poet or a fiction writer or a nonfiction writer, but I tell my students at Alabama that they are *writers*. I think you want to stay a "specialized generalist," and that way you can be improvisational. You know how to move words around, you understand the basic principles. And you shouldn't fear that. It isn't precious stuff. You need to get into the habit of producing quantity, and not worrying so much about perfection.

NDR: *That brings me to a final question, about a favorite craft piece of yours that I like to teach called "Ruining a Story." I was wondering, do you still hold true to the advice that you published in that essay ten years ago, that the magic of a story is in its unfinished bits, its ruin standing out in the open for all to see?*

MM: I've developed it a little more, I've got a new metaphor for it. I ask my students, what's the hardest thing for humans to do? I always conclude the discussion by saying that one of the hardest things we've yet come up with is landing a 40 million dollar airplane on an aircraft carrier at night in the middle of the ocean. This is a very difficult task. And yet people do it. And they also workshop it. They get out of the airplane, they go below decks, and they watch the video, and they're critiqued. They're graded, too. On a scale of five to one. Nobody ever gets a perfect score, a five. Because of this, you might call these landings "controlled crashes." They'll never be perfect, but the key thing is that you landed that airplane, on the deck of that ship, in the middle of the ocean in the middle of the night. And you can always fly again. And maybe next time it'll be better or maybe it'll be worse, but as long as you landed the plane and you can walk away, you can fly again. Get in the airplane again, and embrace the particular mistakes of that particular last time. So you can take the faults in a story, the acceptance of mistake and ruin as an aesthetic, and then put movement on it. Through time, it's okay to live with ruin, imperfection. Think about how you can perfect imperfection, asymmetry, leaving out, raggedness.