

On Being and Becoming a Writer: Interview with Lenard D. Moore

L. Teresa Church is a playwright, freelance writer, quilter, poet, and archival consultant. She is also a member of the Carolina African American Writers' Collective and serves as the organization's archivist. Her writings have appeared in publications such as *Southern Theatre*, *Fertile Ground*, *The Saracen Literary Magazine*, *B.Ma: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review*, and *Word and Witness: 100 Years of North Carolina Poetry*. In 1989, Church won the North Carolina Arts Council's Playwrights Fellowship for her third play, *One Day When I Was Lost*.

Jacksonville, North Carolina native Lenard D. Moore is a writer of great passion. His name is synonymous with poetry. He speaks in the tongues of sonnets, pantoums, ghazals, sestinas, villanelles, free verse, blues and jazz poems, haiku, senryu, minutes, kwansabas, and other forms. Moore is known in literary circles throughout his home state and across the United States, as well as in a number of other countries. He is Founder and Executive Director of the Carolina African American Writers' Collective and Co-founder of the Washington Street Writers Group. His poems, essays, and reviews have appeared in over thirty publications, such as *Agni*, *Callaloo*, *African American Review*, *Colorado Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Obsidian II*, and *Poetry Canada Review*. His poetry is featured in more than thirty anthologies, and has been translated into several languages. Moore is the author of *The Open Eye* (North Carolina Haiku Society Press, 1985), *Forever Home* (St. Andrews College Press, 1992), and *Desert*

Storm: A Brief History (Los Hombres Press, 1993). Praises and recognition have come in abundance, yet he remains humble and accessible, eager to talk about writing and what it means to become a writer. During the spring of 2004, he sat down with poet and playwright L. Teresa Church to talk about his illustrious career.

LTC: How did you come to the craft of writing and what influenced you to become a writer?

LDM: I believe that was a long process that really started when I was in elementary school. While riding the bus to Silverdale Elementary School [in Jacksonville, North Carolina] I read books oftentimes. In those books, I noticed that I could go places. I liked the way that kind of worked my imagination, so I had a love of words early on. Also, my grandfather, Luther T. Pearson, Sr., told lots of stories. My brothers, sister, and I gathered around him and listened to the rich stories he told us. That was inspiring, and I had very good elementary school teachers. This was during segregation—segregated times—at an all-black school like [the one where] I'm sure you attended. I participated in plays, dramas, if you will. All those things were exciting. I wrote some [plays], too, when I was little, and I [participated] in plays at church, in church programs. I think all of that was very important.

My teacher in seventh grade assigned us to write a play, and mine was one of the ones selected for staging. I don't want to use the word produced, because in the classroom you're just putting [the play] on for other students or classmates. Some of my classmates and

I were in my play. That was fun, encouraging. In tenth grade, we wrote some short stories and that, too, was encouraging. I remember that I enjoyed writing those stories. In fact, two of my stories were science fiction, and I used, or tried to depict some of my classmates in some of those stories.

I kept a—I guess you would call it a journal, but our teacher also had us keep a diary when we were in tenth grade. I wrote words down, song titles, names for our dance group, and just different things. I always loved words. I wrote poems too. When I was twenty, I believe I had a major turning point. I went in the Army, and while there, I wrote a lot of poems. I was sending poems back home. First, I was trying to write letters in poetic form and sending [them] to my girlfriend [Lynn, who is now his wife]. Not long afterwards, I started to include a poem with each letter, then maybe sometimes two. Lynn has kept those poems ever since. They're sort of brown now; the paper has faded a little bit [laughter] but she still has poems in my handwriting.

LTC: Do you share those poems?

LDM: [Laughter] Not really. When I was starting out, they were not that good [laughter between LTC and LDM]. Maybe they were to [Lynn], but now that I've been writing awhile, I realize the craft was not quite there yet.

LTC: You were getting started.

LDM: I was getting started. Right.

LTC: You said that you started writing in elementary school. How old were you when you actually penned your first poem?

LDM: I don't believe I remember the exact age that I might have been at that time. I went home a few months ago, and while at church, one of my homegirls who graduated two years before I did, told me she remembered that I wrote poems when I was young, perhaps at some of the church programs, or something. I don't believe I really recall the very first time that I did [write a poem], but I do know that I had a love of words. I still have a love of words. In fact, while in the Army, I would read the dictionary. Really, I believe in learning new words. When I write, I usually have the dictionary right there with me—the dictionary and a good thesaurus. I believe in the power of words.

LTC: You grew up in Jacksonville [North Carolina]. Is that farming country, and was your family involved with farming?

LDM: Jacksonville, since about the early 1940s, is a military community. Here in the twenty-first century, like everywhere else, the landscape has changed, with strip malls and all of that. There were many farms in the area. White people had farms. Black people had farms. My great-grandmother, Fannie Simmons, had a lot of land, and she had two huge fields and

grew peanuts every year. Two of my brothers and I would chop in her peanut fields with her. At that time she was about eighty years old. We also farmed with other people who owned tobacco fields. I did a lot of gardening every year, and I had a huge garden myself.

LTC: What did your family do to make a living in Jacksonville?

LDM: [Jacksonville] was very rural. My father was in the Marine Corps, and my mother started out doing volunteer work with the American Red Cross. Then, she got a job at Camp Lejeune, working in the club system, until she worked her way up to become a supervisor in the club system.

LTC: What do you mean when you say “the club system?”

LDM: That’s like the NCO Club, where the troops, or the Marines, go to have lunch, or maybe at night they want to hear some music.

LTC: With the kind of childhood you had, did you stand apart, as a child who was interested in writing? Was that so different [about your] childhood [and that of] other children?

LDM: I’m not sure whether I stood apart, but I know I tried to do my homework and make good grades. I don’t recall any other people in the area who had an interest for writing poetry. Years later, I found out that my grandmother, Eva Pearson, who died on March 9, 2004, wrote poetry. In recent years she shared some of her poetry with me, but I don’t recall anyone whom I knew at the time writing or publishing poetry. I can’t say there were any poets in that area. However, we know that in every community there are always people writing and, perhaps, they don’t show their works or poems to others for whatever reason.

LTC: When I think about you as a poet, I never find you without a pen or a piece of paper, something on which you jot down something about the surroundings in which you find yourself. Why do you do that?

LDM: One reason is to hopefully make sense of the world in which we live, and to learn something about myself. I find out things about myself through my own writing. When I write, I find that I can create the world that I want to exist; I think that’s fun. Also, I hope to record our history, our experience, and write about truth.

LTC: Do you write every day?

LDM: I try to write something every day. Sometimes I may write haiku for several days. Then, there are times when I may write tanka. There are other times when I’m on a roll with free verse or some other form of poetry. Sometimes, I may work on an essay and then occasionally work on fiction or creative nonfiction. Some days when I don’t get a chance to write, I may read.

LTC: How important is reading to you as a writer?

LDM: Reading is very important because as a writer I must be aware of others who have written, who have left us a body of work, who have in some way or other defined the world in which they lived at that time. I read to hopefully understand the tradition, which is so important.

LTC: Who are some of your favorite authors, and who has been influential in your own work?

LDM: Langston Hughes is one of those influential writers whom I read quite often, and I also share his works with my students. I like the way that he wrote about the African American experience and the way that he used blues as a form for his poetry, and the way that he used jazz as well, to pen his poems. [Hughes] was heavily influenced by music, and I, too, listen to jazz quite frequently, live jazz, as well as jazz recordings, or jazz on the radio. I think that has influenced my work. Langston Hughes is one of those very important writers to me. Gwendolyn Brooks was also very important, and still is in my writing life. I like the way she wrote about the people she knew in Chicago, giving them voice when many times others wouldn't let those folks' voice speak. I like the economy of words that [Brooks] used. I also like AR Ammons' work. He wrote a lot about nature and a lot about North Carolina, so, I feel that I'm able to identify with the geography, which he wrote about in his poems.

LTC: Tell me what your writing process is like.

LDM: I write in my journal, and sometimes I write on loose sheets of paper. A line may come to me and I may start writing a poem, and it seems that I never know where the poem is going to take me, or where the poem is going to turn, where the poem might take some leap, or where the poem might try to draw some parallels, where it might hook some interesting idea that I didn't think about when I first started writing the poem, or where the poem may end up.

LTC: You write in a variety of forms, including tanka and haiku. How did you come to be attracted to these forms?

LDM: It is very interesting how I came to haiku. In January of 1982, I was in bed sick with the flu. When you have the flu you're down for a while, and I suppose I had gotten a little bored and wanted to do something. I looked at my literature book that I had used in a creative writing class that I took when I was stationed in Germany—Stuttgart, Germany. In that book I noticed there were haiku translated from Japanese into English, so I tried writing some haiku, very unsuccessful attempts at first [laughter between LTC and LDM], but I didn't give up. That's how I first became aware of haiku. I didn't know anything about the form. I thought it was just these little poems composed of three lines, but that was definitely not the case. That's not what haiku is.