



INTERVIEW  
with Michael Martone

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by Sarah Coffing and Emily Yoo

**MICHAEL MARTONE** grew up in Fort Wayne, IN. He received part of his undergraduate education at Butler University before transferring to Indiana University. He received his MA from Johns Hopkins University and has taught at colleges around the country, including Warren Wilson College, Iowa State University, Harvard University, and Syracuse University. He currently lives in Tuscaloosa and teaches at the University of Alabama. He has published more than a dozen books, has won two fellowships from the NEA, and won the 1998 Associated Writing Programs Award for Creative Nonfiction. Martone was a member of *Manuscripts* for a few years, and recently announced a writing grant to Butler students who wish to travel around Indiana and write about their experiences. When Martone visited campus in the fall of 2014, he was gracious enough to give an interview to Sarah Coffing and Emily Yoo.

SC: What is your favorite thing about writing?

MM: What I like is kind of the trickster nature. I like entertaining people. I like mixing things up. Also, I think it's hard for writers sometimes, and not so much when you play an instrument. I can't play a violin. I can't play a flute. I have to learn how to do that. But writing? Most of us know how to write or know how to speak, how to use language. So most people will say, "That's an easy art." I like to think of myself as an artist. I think most people tend to think that writing is more a craft. A lot of the things I'm interested in are sort of more conceptual and perhaps artistic than it is craft. Rethinking what writing is is very enjoyable for me. Just because a magazine looked like this and did this, how can you rethink it? How can it be made new?

Something happened on the way over here: I was walking over,

and because—this is what I like about writing. I like it because it forces you to be defamiliarized and notice things. On Atherton, I looked, and all of a sudden there was a little box. It had three things hanging down from it. It's right on the building. And the box looks like the stone that Atherton is made out of. And a guy was walking by, and I said, "What's that on the building?" And he looked and he said, "I think that's a Wi-Fi antenna." And I said, "I think you're right. I think that's a Wi-Fi antenna." And I said, "Look, they actually tried to disguise it as part of the building." And he said, "Yeah. You know, I walk by here every day, and I never saw that before." And that's what I like about writing. I like seeing the things that are all around us that we just take for granted. That's what an artist does, too.

In my undergraduate creative writing class, we're outside all the time. These are kids who have been there three, four years, on the campus. There's a cherry orchard on campus, and I said, "Have you been to the cherry orchard?" And they say, "No," so I said, "Let's go." We get there, and they say, "I walk by here every day. I didn't know these were cherry trees." So it's all about noticing things.

There's a poem by Ezra Pound called "In a Station of the Metro." Metro is the subway in Paris. It says, "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough." What he's saying is the subway car comes in, and all of a sudden he sees a face, and that face reminds him of a pink petal on the black bow of a cherry tree. He notices something. So I told them that, and the cherry trees are there, all blossoming, and so then what I did was I took them—since we don't have a subway—to the busses. We have a bus that circles around campus, and I had the rest of the class in the bus. And all I told them to do was sit there and look out the window and write down things that they saw. I said, "Don't try to make it into a poem. Just the things you see." And then we got off the bus. All of them were on the same bus looking out the same windows. I had them read their lists, and they were all different. It's all about slowing you down and making you pay attention to the world.

EY: Do you have rituals that you go through every day to make yourself aware of things?

MM: I don't, but I think you can get into the habit of that. It is very difficult. I haven't gotten a smartphone yet. I'm afraid of that phone because I know what I'll do with it. I'll play with it, and it will distract me. It's hard, you know how hard it is because everybody says you've gotta be here, gotta do this, gotta do that. But there is a koan. It's a Zen practice. Zen is about what they call mindfulness; to be mindful of the moment. The koan that I repeat in order to put me in that frame of reference is, "Walk when you walk, talk when you talk, die when you die." What that's saying is that we use a heck of a lot of imagination. You guys are artists. You want to work imaginatively.

One of the things that gets wasted is your imagination of the future. And that's called worry. I'm worried about this test, I'm worried about how I'll look when I go out on Friday, and that is a misuse of imagination. You walk when you walk, you talk when you talk, and you die when you die. But most of us are thinking, "Oh, I'm about to die." You just start there, present, for every one of those little things. So, if I wasn't walking when I was walking, I wouldn't have seen that little antenna. I was present. I wasn't thinking about, 'Oh, where am I going to have dinner tonight?' That's very hard to do, but for me, it's very important to be that kind of present.

There's a really interesting book called *Zen in the Art of Archery*. In Japan, the tea ritual, the kimono, everything... You're paying attention to it. That includes just drawing a bow. This German guy goes to Japan to study with this great master of the bow, and he's like, ninety years old. Most bows are now compound bows that have pulleys that will help, but these are regular bows. You have to put hundreds of pounds of pressure in that pull. So, this guy cannot bend the bow enough to string it. He keeps trying, he's incredibly strong, and he keeps trying. And he goes to the master and he says, "I cannot do this!" And the master—he's a little old guy! He takes the bow and immediately takes out an arrow and shoots it perfectly. He says, "I think we should start

with your breathing.” We in the West often think, “Oh, I’ve got to string a bow. That’s my job.” No, your trouble is you have to start with *the* most important thing, your breath. And then all will follow. It’s all of our problems in the way the West, America, Indianapolis, is. We just are so, so fast now. And we have to be attentive to that.

SC: You say that we all take life too seriously. How do you keep yourself from taking life too seriously?

MM: Have you heard of Montessori? Montessori was an Italian educator. But Montessori education now, in the West, we think of it as being for “special kids.” But she actually made it for kids who were poorer—kids who were not gifted at all. Her famous saying is, “A child’s play is his work.” Our classrooms are set up on what is known as a fiduciary model. That is, you, children, know nothing. Banks are fiduciary institutions because what you do is you give your money to your bank, and they hold it in trust until you ask for it back. Schools are like that with certain knowledge. I don’t know how to operate on the human heart. I don’t know what contract law is. I have to go to a place where they’re holding that knowledge, and then I sit in a room, and that knowledge is transferred to me. And because it is knowledge that I don’t know, it is tested. And I can test with the transference. If I get it, I am raised by degree. I am graded up, and I become the fiduciary. I know how to do the human heart. Now that works for a lot of stuff. You need to go find about math, about law, and about medicine. But that’s not true of art. That’s not true of a lot of things. I started talking when I was one or something—you all did. You didn’t have to learn or go to somebody to tell you what grammar was. You were born with it.

Montessori was interested in the kind of instruction that is truly student-led. The fiduciary classroom: you have kids sitting in rows, and you have a teacher up in front of the class, and it’s all about the transference of that knowledge. In a Montessori classroom, the classroom is filled up with all these various stations. Over here will be dress-up stuff. Over here will be a library. Here will be a sandbox. There will be manipulatives; beads and stuff

like that. And there'll be a kitchen. And there's no front of the classroom. And the teacher will meet you at the door and say, "How are you today? What would you like to do today? Oh, you want to go to the kitchen? That's great. Go into the kitchen. I just bought some grapefruit! I want you to find out about that grapefruit. There's an aide in there, she can help you cut it up, and I'll come back later and talk to you about that. And you want to do dress-up? Go over there and we'll talk about it later. And then later, we'll all get together and do some project." But the whole thing was, the student decides what they're learning, and the play itself is, in fact, instructive. My son played for four hours with his dolls, and that taught him certain things that didn't have to do with what I wanted him to learn or thought he should know, but he needed to know. He needed to figure something out there, and this is the way he did it. And Montessori provided that sort of education.

So, what I mean by you guys being so serious is that play or instructive play is now considered not good. You'll hear all the time, "Oh, you want to go to Butler because its program is *rigorous*." Right? Rigorous. And I always say, "'Rigorous' is very close to 'mortus.' Rigor mortis. And death. It's only a step away." It's all about that seriousness, and play looks like a waste of time, but in fact, for a lot of kinds of knowledge, we have to waste time because we don't know. We have to discover it on our own, we have to experience it. There's no way I'm going to walk into an operating room and perform open-heart surgery without rigorous instruction, but rigorous instruction will not make you write a poem. I can't tell you how to write a poem, and if I do, you only write the poem I want to write. You know the poem you want to write. My job as a teacher is to help you find what it is you already know. You already know this; you just don't know you know it.

I'll give you a great example. Before Michael Phelps, Mark Spitz was just as good in the '70s. And he trained down at IU. There was a famous coach there named Doc Counsilman. Spitz, at eighteen, was already a world-class swimmer and everything. So, Counsilman said, "Tell me about your stroke. How do you swim?"

And he said, “Well, I pull down the center part of my body.” He says, “Get in the pool.” At Indiana [University], the pool is all glass, so he put flashing lights on the fingers and toes so they could do a light tracing outside of the stroke. And this is what Spitz was doing. He was doing an S stroke, which is the perfect stroke. He was doing the perfect stroke, but he didn’t even know he was doing it! So, the coach’s job is to say, “Look what you’re doing. That, in fact, is what you’re doing! Can we make it better now? You already have this in you!” So you can think of poetry or art teaching as a kind of coaching. It coaches out of you the things that you already know. It doesn’t instill in you—in the fiduciary model. I don’t put the poems in you. The poems are already in you. So, it takes a kind of playfulness.

SC: A poetry professor of mine brought in a bunch of her sons’ toys and told us, “Okay, grab whatever you want. Now, go out and make a sculpture of it.” She gave us various prompts then, and it was difficult for us at first because we can be analytical, but it was actually very helpful.

MM: I like this person! Do you know the Muses? They’re the Greek gods of art and creativity. Their father is Zeus. In Greek mythology, that’s always a safe bet. Their mother is Memory. So, allegorically, what are the Greeks saying art is? It’s a combination of the analytical and the unconscious. But it isn’t one or the other. Part of what you’re discovering as an artist is how much you’re depending on the unconscious to bubble up, and once it kind of bubbles up, you’re using the analytical to shape it into the perfect shape. But it is a curious act of history that artistic pursuits, this kind of learning, ended up in the university, which is, from medieval times, a critical, analytical machine. You can imagine the administrators back in the ‘70s when creative writing came into the university saying, “We love your craziness! Come in! We’re all wearing white lab coats, but come on in! We’re not asking for much, just a grade.” And over time, this place can’t help itself. It wants to be critical, it wants to sort. It wants to say this is better than that. It all bears down. You can’t play that way. How can I say that the thing you picked up to play with is better than what she picked up? You can’t! It wants to make those

distinctions. The university constantly wants to say, "Oh, she's doing a better job than he is." You can't say that. You're doing your job, and you're doing your job. And most of the culture will say, "They need to know that they're no good." No! We can't possibly know that. All we need to do is produce it. Get it out there. Other people can make judgments about it, but you can't make judgments about it in the midst of the actual creation of it, or you'll stop. You won't do it because it won't be good enough.

EY: Is that the kind of vision you have for your grant to the university?

MM: Yes. The one thing I specifically said about this is, "I do not want this to be used as an award for something somebody has written," because universities have that. They have prizes. Someone writes a poem, and they submit it to a contest, and the judge says, "Yeah, this is the one that wins the money." I wanted to try to get as much money as possible to help as many people as possible create. I don't want something already written. But because it is a limited thing, they're going to have to make some sort of distinction, not on the basis of whether it's a good or bad thing, but whether it's possible. I said I would be fine if somebody said, "Look, I want to write about Shapiro's, and I need \$25 to go and buy a meal and Shapiro's and a bus ticket down there." That's fine. If that's going to help them write something, I don't care what they write. I'm not going to look at it and make sure they did it right. I don't believe that. In Parkour, you run, and there's an obstacle, and you go over it, or around it, or through it, and you fall down, and you get up. What I want the award to be is a propellant. I want velocity, I want movement, I want quantity. I'm not so much interested in quality. That's what the university is all about. The university is all about ranking and rating and stuff like that. I'm about making. As much stuff can be just total crap, I don't care, because you have to do the crap. You have to do all this before you understand what it is that you're actually happy with.

Workshop implies that it's where you want to go, but if you have twelve students in a workshop and you divide them into four groups of three, every fourth week, you have a story up. Over the



course of a semester, you maybe get to *be* a writer for three times. The rest of the time you're acting as a critic, talking about other people's work. What happens is that when you write something, the critical mind has been turned on so much that you're saying, "Well, if I write this, Emily is going to say this when I show it to her. When I write this, Bob's going to say this." And then it gets worse when you say, "If I write this, I'm going to say this." My critical mind is so there. Then you won't write at all! In the context of this university that's so critical by nature, you have to find a way to turn that off, and you have to convince the college itself to understand that, and it's very hard for administrators. Colleges go through assessments and association certificates, and they all want to look like they're very serious.

This all goes back to that question: why are you so serious? You guys get leaked on. You feel that. You feel the pressure and the anxiety of your teachers saying, "We want to be a world-class university." Everybody all of a sudden has to be so serious. So, that's why I ask about pranks and playfulness, and that's what's happened when I go to universities. They say, "We don't have time to do that!" And it's connected, of course, to the other problem of rising tuition. We're spending so much money, we can't possibly have fun. In my undergraduate class, I say to all twelve of them, "All of you get As. There is nothing you can do in which you will not get an A. But this is going to be one of the hardest classes you've ever taken. You've been in school now fourteen or fifteen years, and the only thing you've really learned is to come into class and figure out what I want and try to give it to me so that you can get what you want, which is an A. But you've already gotten an A. And here's the hard part: I don't want anything. This is an elective class. You've elected to write. I have thirty some years of experience writing. We have two and a half hours every Monday to think about that, but you have to decide what it is you want to do." People will drop the class because they've never been able to do something that they want to do. They're ill-equipped. They actually can't imagine what they're going to do for two and a half hours. They feel like they're not doing anything. They can't get their minds around it. You're thought of as an empty vessel that the school fills up as opposed

to a full vessel that you are going to express.

EY: Did the idea of gift-giving come to you because you've experienced that in the past?

MM: Part of this thinking about the way I teach is how to encourage the production of art. There was that, but also it did have to do with what I was very adamant about not wanting to do. I was given the ability to give this grant, and the gift is all about things that stay in motion. Where we are now, in the analytical mind, is this: If I go into a hardware store, and I give the guy a dollar, he gives me a light bulb, so we break away clean. The scales are balanced. But on Sunday, I'm going to get on an airplane. I'm going to be sitting next to a stranger, and that stranger turns to me and gives me a stick of gum, and I take it. What's the exchange? I don't have to give him a dollar. Instead, I'll have to talk to him. That's what that is. The stick of gum is worthless. It has no value. What has value is the transaction. And what it starts is the gift staying in motion. It is the movement of the gift. An award may look like a gift, but in fact, the kind of gift I'm talking about is more like a lottery. I want this to be like a lottery. And if it works correctly, you don't take that money and keep it like you would your light bulb. You take that money and you turn it into something that you give back.

Were you guys in the Pizza Hut reading program Book-It? This is why I'm adamantly against awards. The Book-It program was to get kids to read books. So, we think, "Oh, if they read a book, they get a point. If they get five points, they get a certificate to get a pizza from Pizza Hut." Kids actually read less. My son, the one who played with the Power Rangers, loved to read books. He was reading books when he was four. He went into his first grade class, and they were going to do the Book-It program. We said, "We're not sure about this reward or award for work." But they said, "Oh, yeah, it'll be great." All of a sudden, his reading fell off because now reading became a burden to get to the thing that the adults were saying was important, which was pizza. Before, reading was pizza. It was the award. But our award culture makes the assumption, again, that you all are lazy. That

you, in fact, are not interested in writing poems unless we say, "If you write a good poem, we'll give you an A." But the weird thing is that that A will actually cause you not to write poems because you'll be so worried about the right kind of poem to get an A that you won't write it! To me, it never made sense that in literary magazines and university that you had to create in order to get this prize. Because it's more about winning! If you do something, and it's not good enough, then nothing's valuable. You haven't written anything. You just are using this money to help get you to where you already want to go. It's you. You're the one who says, "Look, I need this." It's a need, not a reward for good writing, but a way to support writing.

I assume in my gift that you like to write. I mean, people are writing. I don't want to give the gift only to award something that you're already doing. I want to give the gift to help you do what it is you're already doing and not make a distinction about this writing as opposed to the other writing, that this writing is valuable. I don't know what writing is valuable. I want everybody to be writing. There used to be a magazine called *Assembling*. Back then, we didn't have computers, but we had mimeograph machines. It was a kind of cheap copier. If you wanted to be in the magazine *Assembling*, you ran off a hundred pages of your poem and you sent that to the editor. The editor takes everything and puts all the piles of a hundred poems together, and then walks down the line and puts it together and staples it. They just assembled the magazine. They didn't make any judgments about the writing. Instead, it was my job to put together all this different stuff, and the writer was in charge of reproducing stuff. My job as an editor was just to assemble it. So, you can think of editing as a kind of judgment and hierarchy, or you can think of it as, "How would you throw a party?" If you were throwing a party, you would not say, "Oh, you didn't dress right, you can't come." You want somebody dressed differently to make it sort of, you know, different. You'd want to include everybody, everybody who sort of wanted to join in together, and all of a sudden they're talking to each other. And again, we're at universities, and it's so much about judgment and hierarchy, but in what way is art much more horizontal as opposed to vertical? I had this money

but I just didn't want to do an award, you know?

SC: It's a very unique opportunity for the writers, too.

MM: Yeah, and as many as possible. That's my only sad part: it can't be more money that would generate more money to give to as many people as possible. People would say to me, "Well, what if somebody just takes the money and goes to Shapiro's and eats the sandwich and never writes?" I don't care because I'm in the gift economy. If I give you a sweater because I like you, I want you to be warm, but you use that sweater to chamois your car, because I gave it to you in the way I gave it to you, it's yours now. You can do anything you want with it. I don't feel bad. I won't feel like I'm being ripped off. That's what happens with grades, too. If I give everybody As, people say, "Well, what if this guy doesn't do anything?" I'll say, "So?" I have the ability to give an A. Here's the A. What you do with the A is not my problem if you're really thinking in terms of the gift. So what if there are people who cheat? Remember the gift like that stick of gum? It has no value to me. This money has no value to me. What is valuable is... I get to talk to you. That's the interesting thing. And if some people assume, 'I'm going to use this money to do something for somebody else.' Can you imagine, say, somebody who lives up in Mishawaka but her grandmother lives in Southern Indiana and she hasn't seen the grandmother in a while and she's dying? So, you get a bus ticket down to Madison to visit your dying grandmother, and you don't write anything. I don't care. It's no skin off my back. This is given away, but on the other hand, that person never would've had that experience with the grandmother—being with her while she was dying—and may have been moved to write something. You're all of the age when your grandparents are facing that. All of a sudden, you have to face that, and here's a poem about being with the grandmother when she died, and that resulted from a little gift of a bus ticket to go to Madison. But that's just it. We think that an A has value. The A has no value. The gift of my time, that's two and a half hours I'll spend with you to write. There's the value. But a lot of people can't see that as value anymore.

EY: That doesn't happen much anymore.

MM: No, it happens less and less. I'm a teacher down in Alabama. I get paid pretty well by the university. And my students pay tuition, but culturally, we understand something. When you pay your tuition, you pay somebody, the bursar, who pays somebody, who then pays me because we have to realize that this exchange is not a commodified exchange. Over in Jordan Hall 234, the classroom, if I stood in the doorway and said, "Before I tell you anything today, you need to pay me \$500." Our connection now is broken because I'm like a guy selling you a light bulb. Even though I still know what I know and you don't know what you don't know, you don't trust that anymore. Culturally, we do operate in the gift economy because what that says is, "Oh, Michael, you've gone into this to make money." But, really, I haven't. I don't go into this to make money. I do make money, but that is culturally diverted. That's why it's unfair when people say teachers aren't paid what they're worth. They aren't in it for that. Nurses aren't in it for that. We would not trust teachers or nurses who were only in it for the money. The same thing happens with a preacher. In fact, when we find a preacher who, all he seems to want is money from donations, we don't like the preacher anymore. There are these things that operate in the gift economy, but fewer and fewer of them do, and that's what capitalism sort of does. It wants to make everything in that kind of exchange; that my class is worth \$500.