

## The Haberdasher

Peddlers of Literary Art  
Interviews

# Rob Davidson: Bringing Fiction Writing to the People

Posted by [The Haberdasher](#) · April 22, 2012 · [Leave a Comment](#)

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**by Jessica Harrington**

Rob Davidson will be the key-note speaker, as well as workshop leader and panelist, in the upcoming writing conference Wordfire, put on by Butte College. He is a professor at CSU Chico and recently released his third book, a collection of short stories, titled *The Farther Shore*. I had the pleasure to sit down with Rob in his office in Taylor Hall on Chico States campus to discuss, among other things, his writing, the literary community here in Chico, and what he hopes to inspire in those attending Wordfire on April 28, 2012.

**Jessica Harrington:** So you grew up in Minnesota, went to school in Wisconsin and Indiana, and went to the Caribbean when you were in the Peace Corps how did you end up in Chico?

**Rob Davidson:** (Laughter) That's a funny story. Well, the short answer is that they gave me a job, and the academic job market is such that you follow the work. But, I was actually very attracted to coming here because I'm a fan of Raymond Carver and this campus is famous, as far as writers in America go, because this is where Carver started as a college student. He took 'Intro to Creative Writing' right here in asbestos ridden Taylor Hall from John Gardner (laughter). So it was kind of a treat for me to come out here and see this campus and then when they offered me the job I just thought, Wow, how nice for me that I can come to a place that is important to me for those reasons. And, of course, I've just come to love it here. Chico, right? It's an amazing place. Over the years I've come to consider myself fortunate. Plus I love this school, it's a really good place to teach.

**JH:** Yes, it is a beautiful campus and a great town. To discuss the town a bit, I want to talk about the literary scene here in Chico. I've lived here for about 7 years, and to me it seems like the literary scene is really picking up momentum, especially in the last few years. It seems like there is more outlets for writers, more readings going on, there is more contests- do you think that there has been movement in the literary scene as far as making itself more prominent, like the art and music scene is?

**RD:** I do, I do. I've been here for 10 years and I can say that there has been an active literary scene since the day I got here, and it is growing. Something like the Butte College Writing Conference

show that it's growing. What I think is changing, though, is the awareness of it. I think that people, like me, who run a reading series on this campus, are getting a little smarter about getting the word out to people. Things have been happening but it's been more like an in-group sort of thing, and I think it's really important that we step outside of that and try to bring the community in. So both of those things are true. It is one thread in the larger artistic fabric of Chico. You know there is a great theatre scene, a great music scene, art scene— and there is also a great literary scene and people need to know that. Lyons Books has helped a lot too because, as you know, they sponsor their own reading series and focus on local writers. It's given us a place, one place among many, to call home. It's almost weekly that they host an event over there. They've kind of become one of the important local centers of gravity.

**JH:** They are also sponsoring and helping out with Butte Conference which has been great.

**RD:** Right. I'm just really grateful for them. Plus it's nice to have place that I can send people when they ask "Oh hey where can I get your books?" I can just tell them to go to Lyons; they keep the books in stock. Writers need a place like Lyons books if anyone *actually* wants to buy *physical* books, right? If they aren't getting their books electronically, it's nice to be able to have that. I am old fashioned, I still love book stores, I like buying books, I like having a book store where I know the owner and the owner knows me. I love that, it's a community, and that is really important to me.

**JH:** I want to talk about *The Farther Shore* for a moment. It seems like there's a lot of influence from your real life in your stories, how much would you say your life influences your stories or how often are your stories adapted from actual experiences and just kind of embellished upon?

**RD:** I'll insist that's its fiction. The question of the connection between, say, a writer's "real life or autobiography" and the work is inexplicable, it's there. Sometimes I'm much more conscious of it; sometimes I'm unconscious of it. I look at myself as thief willing to take whatever I need from whomever, myself included. If I wanted to I could point to certain things in those stories that come from life but—not to sound evasive—that seems less interesting to me.

**JH:** Right.

**RD:** I'll give you a case in point to explain the way I look at it. "Criminals," the last story in *The Farther Shore*, was one I was trying to write for a long time, about six or seven years. I knew a person who one day went down to the beach, took all his clothes off, jumped into the ocean and started swimming. They had to go fish him out in a boat. I worked with this guy, I knew him, and I always wondered what made him do that? What was going through his head? Why would anybody try to kill themselves that way? I took that real person and the real event and I sort of just played with it for years, and ended up writing a story that has nothing to do with the guy. The story is in no way about that guy. I was just interested in that one thing that he did. So you could say that there is a kernel of a real event or something, but it's very much a fiction I have created. And that's really the paradigm, that's the way I think about it. It is a mistake, in my opinion, to like read that way—to insist on the biography. Of course, certain writers, like Sylvia Plath, invite that, but I would argue that actually it's the work that's important, not who it came from. So I am inspired by life, I am inspired by people and things that happen but I always end up with some artistic object I have created and that's what I'm interested in. That's why a figure like Shakespeare is so fascinating, because he's dead and we don't really know too much about him.

**JH:** That's funny you bring that up because I was just discussing this very thing in one of my classes about how that's the beauty of his work. There is nothing personal to compare it to you so you can't say he wrote this because he was involved with these things personally, politically, whatever, you just have to take the work as it is, and that's what makes it so timeless I feel like and so open for interpretation.

**RD:** That's a great example of the luxury, in a writer's eyes, of history erasing you biographically so we're left with just the work. Probably a lot of writers would like to just have the work looked at and admired, or not, but just the work. We live in culture that is heavily shaped around personalities. For an artist, certain meanings are attached to who you are, or who an audience thinks you are; it's inescapable, I understand that. But if there is a luxury to being a literary short story writer it's that most people ignore you. (Laughter) They don't read literary short stories—the kind of stuff I write. It's kind of funny, actually. I mean, you'd like to have a big audience, right? But it's kind of comforting because the people who do read that stuff, most of them know what I am talking about and they just appreciate the work. (Laughter) I don't know if that answer made any damn sense at all.

**JH:** (Laughter) Yeah it did.

**RD:** (Laughter) I'm just kind of thinking out loud.

**JH:** Okay I'm going to switch gears here and ask you about the conference. What is it that you particularly like about being able to participate in a writing event such as Wordfire?

**RD:** It's important. These kinds of events not only incorporate the community awareness we were just talking about, they are about getting aspiring writers together; the people who want to get that sort of shock of inspiration, or energy; who want to be surrounded by a community of like-minded people. It can be tremendously helpful and successful as a way to help writers in a non-academic way. There are no grades, so it's kind of refreshing. I do this all the time on campus, but there's always grades and assessment and that stuff just gets in the way.

**JH:** Grading definitely adds a level of anxiety to the process.

**RD:** For everyone, the student and the teacher. So it's really nice to do something like this creative writing festival because we're all there because we love it and no one's going to be given a grade or anything, you're just doing it because you want to be around a group of people who share your passion. So it's really fun.

**JH:** So the workshop you are doing is short-short fiction.

**RD:** Yes.

**JH:** Can you elaborate a little bit on that? Can people expect to walk out with a short, like a 55 word story?

**RD:** Well, first of all we're going to read two or three examples of the short-short and just talk a little about what's happening in them. I have selected the stories that we'll read because, in addition to being ripping good stories, they contain what I'm going to be talking about, which is structure, form, and repetition in the short-short. After we've read and talked about those things, we're going to do a little in-class writing and we'll just see what people come up with. I hope that

we can draft a piece, or at least a working version of a piece, and then, yeah, they can walk out of there with a new story, or at least a start to a story. I want to emphasize that the point of a workshop like this isn't to think that you can write a story in an hour, although maybe you can, but usually you'll get something started then hopefully you'll go home and work on it. I'm going to give the attendants a list of some books they might want to check out, if they are interested in that particular form.

**JH:** Wow that sounds like it will be really fun. What do you hope people walk away with after attending your workshop or Wordfire in general?

**RD:** If you come to that conference I'm going to give you a little bit of knowledge, a way to approach your work, but ultimately just a massive amount of encouragement, to feel like, "Yeah, I can do this." Because it's hard. Let's face it, nobody's going to walk up to you and be like, "Hey, have you written a story? Would you like to write a story?" You know no one's going to do that. You have to want to do it, and have it be important to you. One thing that can inspire you and make you feel like you can do that is that sense of community, like I said, it's so important, it's like a little shot in the arm.

**JH:** It is nice having people to bounce ideas off of and have people that can give you real criticism that's going to be constructive.

**RD:** Yes, and when those things work you walk out at the end of the day and you want to go home and write. That's what it's all about.

**JH:** So I have one last question, if you could only read one book for the rest of your life, what would it be?

**RD:** (Laughter) What would it be?

**JH:** If that's too narrow ill accept one author for the rest of your life.

**RD:** Henry James and *The Portrait of a Lady*. It's without parallel.

Rob's books will be available for sale at Wordfire. Be sure to come to Butte College Chico Center on Thursday, April 19 at 6:30 to hear Rob read from *The Farther Shore*. For more information on Rob Davidson visit his website at [www.robdauidsonauthor.net](http://www.robdauidsonauthor.net). To register for the Wordfire writing conference, please visit [www.buttewordfire.org](http://www.buttewordfire.org).

## About The Haberdasher

A collaborative publication of the Butte College Literary Arts Club and members of the literary community, The Haberdasher, or le Hab, is your Peddler of Literary Art for Northern California and beyond.

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