

# Finding Other Worlds in Midwestern Towns: A Conversation with Jim Reese

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Jim Reese is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Great Plains Writers' Tour at Mount Marty College in Yankton, South Dakota. Reese's poetry and prose have been widely published, and he has performed readings at venues throughout the country, including the Library of Congress and San Quentin Prison.

Jim was my undergraduate adviser at Mount Marty, and we've stayed in touch over the last decade. In this conversation, we discuss his new book, *Bone Chalk*, a collection of essays tackling the experience of growing up in a major Midwestern city, how it contrasts with living as an adult in a much smaller Midwestern town, as well as experience teaching within the criminal justice system.

**SS: This collection is your first comprised of prose pieces, essays. Prior to this, you've published three collections of poems. What made you decide you wanted your next book to be essays rather than poetry? And what is your process like for deciding if what you are writing is going to be a poem or prose piece?**

JR: I had been slowly writing essays since I was a PhD student. In fact, my first published piece was a short piece of creative nonfiction. I was a city guy who was assimilating to rural life or trying to. The voices of small-town regulars, their cadences, quick wit, story-telling capabilities – the palaver fascinated me. I would find myself writing down one-liners and words I'd never heard before, like

“elbow bender” or “as worthless as tits on a Boar.” I think short (and sometimes long) nonfiction essays is what I should be doing. The market is so competitive. So that's why I waited until I had my first book contract (a collection of poetry) to dive back into prose. It was a relief. It's harder to write prose. But, it gives me room to kick my boots off and stretch out.

Process. I still like writing poems. I definitely have a photographer's eye. I used to joke with other PhD students that I'm going to rack up all this debt to finish this degree, and I'll wind up being a photographer – a job I had on the side. But, taking wedding photos is a drag. What it taught me was how to see something differently than the next guy. I mean, I'm looking down at a light switch in this room right now, and it's missing a cover. That image of an outlet can be a poem, or it could turn into prose. It depends on how focused I am.

**SS: In “Mid Heart West Land,” you ask “Is writing a fit profession for a man?” You didn't know then. Do you now?**

JR: Yes. It is. I always felt like I had to get my hands dirty – to sweat – for it to be really called work. Well, if you sit at a computer long enough, you can sweat. And when you take writing seriously you realize how hard it is. It's just like baseball. Most of the time when you go to the plate you fail; you don't always get a hit. Baseball, like life, like writing, is failing a lot of times. Failing to succeed. I have to go to the gym, too. And get outside and do something – work with my hands. I have to or I'll go mad. When I wrote that line, “Is writing a fit profession for a man?” – that was 14 years ago. “Mid Heart West Land” was one of my first essays (originally called “Cat Scratch Fever”). Back then, I didn't know for sure.

**SS: The term “otherworld” is referenced in the book, and to me, it seems to be a theme — places we want to belong (for you, country/rural life), but are still foreign to us.**

JR: There’s a lot of assimilation going on. Earned belonging. Whether it’s at the prisons I teach at, or the lane I drive down.

**SS: I write about the Midwest a lot, but from a Minnesotan perspective, which feels very different than Nebraska. We’re not cornhuskers or bugeaters. We’re Vikings, Scandinavians doncha’ know. You could break down the Midwest region into two subregions: “Great Lakes” and “Great Plains.” Do you find different Midwestern states *feel* different to you? Do you think someone from the coasts would be able to tell us apart?**

JR: Here’s what I know to be fact about the Midwest. People in Iowa drive like shit. I was born in Iowa which gives me authority to say that. I’ve been back to Iowa every year to see my family and things haven’t changed.

What else I know to be fact is Nebraska will never be able to buy a national football championship. They need to give Scott Frost a chance. And Runzas are the bomb! Also, I think from living in Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota it’s safe to say there are at least ten ways to say Sloppy Joe. And finally, Midwesterners are nicer than people who live in coastal communities. That’s a fact. We know everyone will move back to the middle of America eventually. Global warming is real, and we have to maintain our hospitality — it’s in the contract.

**SS: Do you find yourself having a definitive identity rooted in where you live? Or are you still at conflict with the city boy/country boy thing?**

JR: You really know me. I’ve tried to lose some of the city mannerisms that haunt me. I mean, I

can honk at people here in my little city and half of them won’t know who I am. I try not to give them the bird or scream. I can still be an ass when I’m driving. I try not to be, but I can’t. I really think I’m a good driver. My daughters would probably argue that I’m insane. My wife could possibly agree. The city in me has never left the wheel.

There are so many good qualities I learned from living in small towns. Listening being number one. The second-best quality is looking — really seeing my surroundings. It’s hard to adjust to nosey people, but it comes with the territory. In the city you can just leave — find a new friend. In small towns it doesn’t work that way.

There are some hilarious things going on everywhere. You know, I can sit at a kitchen table and listen to people talk for 40 minutes about how a relative stranger is vaguely related to someone they kinda know. It baffles me how they can trace a family tree — it’ll eat up the whole afternoon. I think on bad days I’ll leave this town/small city for a bigger city. On good days I like it just fine. Wherever you go, you take yourself with you — it took me awhile to figure that out and that the grass isn’t greener somewhere else.

There are pros and cons to everywhere. Right now my daughters love it here — good schools, they have an amazing dance teacher — they beat teams in Minneapolis, so, they are learning from the best. I think you did the right thing by moving to the Twin Cities. It’s a lot of fun. Lincoln, Nebraska is a great city. Sioux Falls is pretty cool. Ankeny, Iowa — cool place. Austin, Texas — love it. San Luis Obispo, CA — cool, too expensive. The college where I work is exploding with great things. Mount Marty has turned into everything we’ve been dreaming of, so I’m really excited to be a part of that. And I get to work at the federal prison here which has been very rewarding, and it’s given

me a chance to help others change their lives for the better. I am lucky, too. I get chances to read and perform and give workshops throughout the country so I get to see all these places most people don't. So, I can attest it isn't greener somewhere else. Every place has their perks – what's yours? I can have fun wherever I go.

**SS: What writers have influenced you the most? There is, of course, your boy Ted Kooser. But is it just Nebraska poets? Just Midwestern writers? Do you find inspiration in other regional writers who are outside of your region?**

JR: Kent Meyers is a great friend and editor. The late Chuck Bowden helped me a lot. I think he takes the prize as the best gonzo reporter. Maria Mazziotti Gillan in Jersey has helped so many writers throughout the world. Jim Daniels in Pittsburgh. Geroge Bilgere in Ohio. Patrick Hicks in Sioux Falls. Kevin Clark in California. I could go on and on. I love writers who help other writers.

**SS: In the book, you said ten years ago, when you first started teaching at the prison, you didn't have a comeback to "Why in the hell would you want to help prisoners?" After ten years, do you have an answer now?**

JR: Yes. I'm starting my 13th year now working in prisons. Here's what I know. A recent 2013 RAND Corporation report found strong evidence that correctional education plays a role in reducing recidivism: "Education is key to turning our justice system around. The study concluded that every \$1 spent on prison education translated into \$4 of savings during the first three years, post-release." If nothing else, if you are just worried about "Your Tax Dollar," that's why you should care. More importantly, though, is that prisoner education helps transform lives on both sides of the fence. What you also have to do is help them tap into the emotional instabilities that brought them to prison

in the first place. If a person never comes to terms with himself or herself, you are just going to send an angry person right back out into society.

**SS: I was surprised to read in "Buckets, Indians and Habaneros" that you are a Yankees fan. That doesn't sound very Midwestern.**

JR: I liked Rickey Henderson when I was younger. He was so fast. He played for a lot of teams. I liked the Yankees because my dad was a big Yankees fan and that's what we watched. Now he lives in Kansas City, so...

**SS: What was the biggest challenge in writing this book or pulling the collection together?**

JR: I wanted to make sure it was at least 150-175 pages. Another publisher who was interested in the book at the same time SFA Press was said they wanted to see more work. I had this prison manuscript I was working on, so I cut 175 pages down to 33. That was a challenge. But it seemed to fit in this collection (and that other manuscript wasn't ready and I really wanted to include something about my work in prisons). That press was interested (I think) in trying to develop this thread that ran throughout the collection. It's good for marketing. I get it. But, how do you define a person? There isn't one thread – we are complex people and this first collection of essays (which some might categorize as a memoir), doesn't have a definitive narrative thread that runs throughout like a work of fiction. I think there's a lot of crime in a lot of these essays. And then there's some that are way out there, hilarious observations from the Heartland – all of them recording the zeitgeist of the time.

(This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity. For the full interview, please visit <https://sdsuakwood.com>.)