



Conversation with Litwin author Peter McDonald by Olivija Liepa

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This interview was conducted as part of the Author Interview Series with Library Students, published on the Litwin Books blog, where prospective information professionals meet with authors to discuss the research process and engage in a deep dive on important topics of the field from concept to publication.

Before Peter McDonald was Dean of Library Services at Fresno State, he lived a thousand other lives. All of his former adventures, whether causing a ruckus in local music clubs, exploring the spiritual realm, or living in solitude in the Alaskan wilderness, are connected by the thread of curiosity and a desire to seek new and unfamiliar ways of knowing the world. McDonald cites his various experiences and interests as a key reason why he was drawn to librarianship after years of self-discovery – librarians have to be quick-witted and curious to excel at one of the most well-rounded academic disciplines on the planet.

This conversation allows readers to enter McDonald's world of music, poetry, and radical environmentalism throughout the author's life in [*Underground: From Deadbeat to Dean*](#). The memoir takes its readers along on McDonald's vicissitudes – a word affectionately used by his father to describe the endless wanderings and restlessness of his youth.

This interview was conducted by Olivija Liepa, a dual degree MA/MLS student studying Archives and Public History at New York University and Library & Information Science at Long Island University.

Olivija Liepa: How was your experience with writing and publishing this memoir?

Peter McDonald: Well, I had no intention to write a memoir. I have all sorts of scholarly books under my belt, a hundred articles or so. It just never occurred to me to write a memoir. Being a librarian, I have immense respect for our work, but on its own it is not memoir material. I mean, how many librarians write memoirs? Rory Litwin sent me an email and said, "I would like you to write a memoir – let's have lunch." So I took the train up to Sacramento, and we had lunch.

Rory, kind of like Library Juice Press, is precise, meticulous, and very intentional with his language. I would say he's a serious soul, and I have immense respect for Rory. We have bashed heads on and off – he wants a meeting run A through Z, and I am the type of person to say: "Let's start with Z!"

I thought about it for three months, he seemed in no hurry, and I finally got back and said: why not! I began to write, and early in the writing process I realized: this won't make sense if I don't go back to this, and that won't make sense if I don't get back to this, and so forth. So I just thought what the hell – start with a bunch of lizards running around in a hospital in Brazil.

It took me three months to write that book. I'm not sure if it's what Rory expected – I think he wanted me to start with Sid Vicious – how do you end up as a library dean with an arrest record and knowing all these punk musicians? I chose to do the whole thing because you begin to understand why I'm a radical if you have met my parents. I grew up all over the world. So the book is a weird hybrid.

I really enjoyed writing it, spending so much time reaching out to old friends, back to a good thirty, forty, fifty years ago. I found that with memories – it's like *Rashomon* – nobody has a clue. That quote in the introduction by Carl Jung in his autobiography really spoke to my own experience:

“Thus it is that I have now undertaken...to tell my personal myth. I can only make direct statements, only ‘tell stories.’ Whether or not the stories are ‘true’ is not the problem. The only question is whether what I tell is *my* fable, *my* truth.”

It's my story, and none of it is invented or made up – I've got several fiction books – why do I need to write another?

Olivija: What were some of the highlights that stood out as you were reliving and recollecting information for this book?

Peter: I never stopped writing, waiting for somebody to confirm or deny my memories. My whole interaction with Iggy Pop for example, I reached out to four people who were there, and even the girl who was with Iggy that night, hasn't the remotest idea. I just said: here is *my* memory.

I find fiction and scholarly writing exhausting, in both there is an exactitude that has to happen. You can't forget that someone walked through the door four pages back in fiction narratives. And in scholarly writing you can't just throw out opinions without some reason to feel they have validity. Certainly, my scholarly books by university presses were difficult – there's a thousand things you have to get fact-checked and peer-reviewed. So writing the memoir was very easy in comparison, it was almost fictional in that there's a lot of interesting and funny stuff. A lot of memories came up that I had not thought about in years or forgotten entirely, and all of them made it into the book.

I did not let people's memories influence me that much. My friend Taylor (Grant) was a big influence on my life in the '70s, when I met Basquiat. I listened to him, he's an archivist at heart, and kept everything Basquiat had ever done years before he ever got famous. He's got a stack of Basquiat's (or SAMO's) drawings and notebooks. I don't have this instinct – I had all these unsigned drawings of Andy Warhol's when he was a costume designer, and he did some opera. Andy's mother had given them to my mother as a gift after Andy died. I don't know where they are, somewhere in a drawer.

Olivija: I want to return to what you said about starting with Z – nonlinearity. This story is mostly linear, however, there is one instance of you writing in non-linear fashion. As you write about your formative youth years in Alaska, and though they were sandwiched between your education at McGill, you choose to narrate your time in Alaska as a singular experience. Do you have any reflections on the linearity in your narration?

Peter: The reason why I jump around is because I had a very seminal period in Alaska. There was

something about learning in and from Alaska that moved me. To be in the wilderness, you only have to read Thoreau to understand how it could move someone. I left high school and a bit of college and I went to Alaska for three or four years. I then came back and did two more years, much more sophisticated and older, in my late twenties. More worldly experience compared to this wide-eyed nature kid I was the first time I went up. I felt it all should be together, the spiritual qualities of living in wilderness deserve to be put together as a driver of something important in my life. Because of this, I am very serious about the environment, and I am much more radical than any board I've ever been on. Get rid of capitalism, let's start there.

The nonlinearity served a purpose to put my life in wilderness into one section, a way to describe something important and deep to me, especially since the latter part of the book goes deeper into some of my environmental concerns. I don't consider myself an environmentalist – I am a radical. Environmentalism is all about driving an electric vehicle and relying on solar panels to do something. They won't do much, and that's based on fact. Not many people want to hear those facts, ergo I am friends with someone like Derrick Jensen, he's been very influential. I wish I had met Edward Abbey. He used to throw beer cans out of his truck window into the national park, and when people asked why, he explained that those beer cans just make this ugly highway look better, the problem with this national park is that there is a road here. There should be no roads. Get out of your Winnebago and into the wilderness. So that's why the nonlinearity is used in the book, putting these experiences together.

Olivija: I definitely want to return to environmentalism and radicalism. First, I want to touch upon your punk-rock days, which is a major way that the book is presented through the cover, blurb, and descriptors. How did you go about choosing to highlight this aspect of your life and your years as a rock promoter in Seattle?

Peter: I first had a taste of what it was like to be around big-name rock people during the Olympics in Montreal when we hosted a speakeasy. My memory is that Emerson, Lake & Palmer, this big glam rock group from the '70s dropped by, as did other A-list people. We were sort of the cool thing in town, you could get drunk for nothing, there were cute girls and a lot of sports people. It kind of piqued my interest, this sort of weird nightlife. I am a morning person – in wilderness you go to bed when it's dark, and wake up with the first light. So I had my first taste there, with Taylor and all of us who had that sort of studio speakeasy during the '76 Olympics going. So when I came to New York on my way to visit my parents in '77 or '78 and stayed with Taylor, he had taken the whole concept of music promotion from Montreal down to New York City. I stepped out wearing a wool cap and big hobnail boots, looking like some mountain man with scruff on my face and greasy hair, and within a couple of days I was suddenly all decked out like some punk rocker.

I grew up in the 1960s, and the theme of the '60s, beyond the hippies and the political movements, was rock'n'roll music – The Beatles, The Rolling Stones. Every new album was this unfolding of a new experience, and so music was integral to my life. I just remember how electrifying The Doors were in Mexico City in the '60s, one of their most famous concerts ever. To have been there, in this little club in Mexico City with Jim Morrison was absolutely riveting.

With that music became seminal in my life. When I stepped off a failed fishing trip in Bellingham with some money in my pocket in 1980, I gravitated toward music. Seattle in the '80s and the early '90s became the heartbeat of rock'n'roll for the entire world with the explosion of grunge. Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and all those guys, who I knew. It was just this journey I was on at the time because intellectually my life had changed. I had a different environment in which I was expressing who I was.

In truth, I didn't really care for punk very much. There is a lot of energy, but to me, it's sort of boring screaming at people. New wave, the sort of intelligence that David Byrne brought to Talking Heads, my friends in The Blackouts brought to their music, or Verlaine with Television. Musicality and intelligence became very interesting to me, and I stayed with it long enough to consider it an important part of my life.

Olivija: Do you feel as though there was a contrast between that rock promoter persona and your career that was still under development at the time?

Peter: For me, the life of inquisitive intelligence is more important in my book and in my life than anything else. Being an academic librarian is a renaissance profession, you have to know a bit of everything to thrive in that environment. It was attractive in that sense. Pursuing librarianship continued the life of the mind for me. All through my rock years, I never stopped reading books and going to listen to writers.

My first year in library school I still wore kohl around my eyes and had this big shank of hair. I wore Keds sneakers, tight black pants, and a jacket. I looked pretty silly, it was a lot of affectation, and I am aware of that. Part of my swagger came with me in the early days of my profession, certainly my education. Somehow, it endeared me to my professors, as a lot of people in my library cohort were well into their thirties. Some even had law degrees. I never saw it as an odd fit whatsoever, I sort of thought it made me more interesting than somebody who had been a librarian in their head all their life.

Olivija: The thread of intelligence and curiosity throughout your memoir is a constant, especially as you explore new ways of thinking and seeing the world. Do you believe that there is anything that we, as information professionals, stand to gain by incorporating environmentalist, non-western, or anti-capitalist modes of thinking into our profession?

Peter: I really think our profession needs to move that way. A group like the Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG) and Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) strive to take the profession out of its complacency. More than anyone I know, Rory, through the work he does with publishing and workshops, really gets how important it is for our profession to get educated about how the world really works. Soft-headed, democratic liberalism is not how the world works, and not how so many people on this planet live, hand to mouth.

I don't think our profession does nearly enough to really offset the whole neutrality we are entrenched in. This aspect of the profession to me is just bullshit. So I do believe that our profession needs to get active. We are very active in our narrow little area, intellectual property, and intellectual freedom, making sure that books get into the right readers' hands. Telling the world that the emperor has no clothes is not how we approach things, and we have to approach it that way. Humankind is headed for extinction in a few hundred years if we don't change.

Olivija: That is a generous estimate.

Peter: I say that because many of my liberal friends don't want to hear it. It's a hard truth, how does it sustain? Half of my personal library collection is environmentalist books. The ones in the shelves directly behind me are poetry.

Olivija: Poetry is a recurring and core motif in your book, and you are a poet yourself in many ways. Would you want to speak to the importance of poetry as it weaves throughout the entirety of your

memoir?

Peter: I've published poems and poetry books. I've known any number of brilliant poets and was blessed by becoming management in libraries. My life in academia and as a dean allowed me to bring poets to the students. There was something in the concision of poetry, and the lyricism of good poetry that has always moved me and seemed a shorthand to catch one's spirit, evoke something.

I am a modernist, everything until Ezra Pound I have a hard time with. But I was blessed to know Sam Hamill, who was very influential in my life. He was a publisher, Copper Canyon Press, arguably among the best poetry presses in the country. Sam was a Zen Buddhist and a radical environmentalist. He turned me onto Japanese and Chinese Tang poetry. So poetry was another window through which I could look at the world.

I served on the board of Durland Alternatives Library at Cornell, among the most radical libraries in the country. This opened up opportunities to meet people like Denise Levertov, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, and amazing human being, one of the great poets of the twentieth century. Through her, I met many other poets and got involved with poetry at Ithaca College and Cornell, and when I was at Syracuse I could bring in poets because I was a top-notch Associate University Librarian there. And of course, when I was Dean at Fresno State I could start bringing them in and did. I ended up as the director of the Fresno Poets Association. It has become a huge part of my life, and many of the poets who mean something to me are in the book. Not all of them, and not all of the ones I have had wonderful times with are in the book, but parts had to be cut. They let me get away with 450 pages.

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Charles Simic died this month, a wonderful human being. There isn't a single one of his poems that's longer than a page, maybe one per book. I like short poetry because my heart is in the Zen experience of nature, which my life in Alaska taught me. If poetry isn't grounded in Gaian mysteries – the earth, soil, freeze, grasses – I am not interested. There are just so many poets that are in the English Canon of literature that are just dreary to me because they are just about suburban niceties and I couldn't care less about that.

Olivija: I definitely see the ways your poetry ties back into your philosophy. I want to open it up to you, with anything that I may have neglected to mention or ask you, or any calls to action you may have.

Peter: You know, my sister read the book, and she's an ex-hippie. The whole punk rock part of my life just turned her off, but she loved it once I became a librarian and joined PLG, and became active in bringing a progressive voice to our profession. I feel that progressive voice is dying. I am a Gaian Communitarian, that's my philosophy, vis-a-vis environmentalism, it is a generic term. But Gaia is very alive, it thrives and it is dirty, and it's messy and it's bloody, and beautiful. So I would say for our profession, we need to get our feet back in the soil and heads out of the clouds; Get back to a radical, communitarian process by which we can confront the elite, corporate, capitalist hegemony that pays for libraries. I think we should not worry about what academia gives a shit about, or our historical attitude within the profession and need to reinvent it. We really need to get our faces out of screens and back into a communitarian sense of purpose based on human contact and empathy, and not what we do on a screen or in our offices with our computers. I served one dean during my profession who said to the librarians, "You all sit there, in front of your screens, instead of sitting around having coffee, talking, and figuring out how to move the library ahead. You are not gonna figure it out looking at a screen." And I would agree with that, that's my own belief of the day.

Let's get back to being human! I am very suspicious of new technologies, I am one hundred percent with

Jerry Mander on that. I have immense hope and positive feelings about human communitarian togetherness, and that we are going to figure it out. But we are going to figure it out by being small and nimble, in small groups of like-minded people, making the transformation happen.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE FIELD