

## Michael C. Blumenthal (1949 - )

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Michael C. Blumenthal is a poet, lawyer, and educator who has also ventured into essays, memoirs, and fiction. Among his better-known verse collections are *Days We Would Rather Know* and *Dusty Angel*. His novel *Weinstock among the Dying* casts a baleful eye at academia, while his nonfiction ranges from *When History Enters the House: Essays from Central Europe* to a remembrance of his youth, *All My Mothers and Fathers: A Memoir*. Blumenthal once commented: "Like many poets, I came to my vocation, one might say, 'through the back door,' having struggled through years of seemingly desirable yet (to me) unsatisfying jobs, while 'stealing' the time for my true work. The original impetus for my writing, perhaps, was best reflected in a statement made by Robert Mezey — 'I am a man, a Piscean, and unhappy, and therefore I make up poems' — but I feel, now, that my work derives from the healthier (and happier) desire to tap the sources of my own inner wisdom, and to make music of it."

Blumenthal, trained as a lawyer, went into editing and then became a lecturer in poetry at Harvard University and ultimately director of the Creative Writing program there. From 1992 to 1996 he lived and worked in Budapest, Hungary, as a senior Fulbright lecturer. Since then, he has been visiting professor at universities and colleges both in the United States and abroad. Blumenthal's first book of poetry, *Sympathetic Magic*, appeared in 1980. His second, *Days We Would Rather Know*, "adds a buoyant and odd new presence to contemporary American poetry," according to Helen Vendler, writing in the *New Republic*. Vendler pointed out that while Blumenthal's subjects, such as the Holocaust or mental doubt, might be termed "tragic," the approach he takes in his poetry creates "poems exhilarating to read, full of lifts and turbulence." In the poem "Over Ohio," for example, he writes of the joys of flying: "You can say what you like about the evils / of technology / and the mimicry of birds; I love it, I love the / sheer, / unexpurgated hubris of it, I love the beaten / egg whites / of clouds hovering beneath me." In this "irrepressible poem," as Vendler further observed, "social pieties ... fall away like shed garments." Vendler went on to comment that even in "the grimmest poem ... Blumenthal finds a moment for quizzical humor."

In his 1999 collection *Dusty Angel*, similar attributes were noted by critics. David Yezzi, for example, writing in *Poetry*, noted that Blumenthal "writes wonderful satire." The poet gathers both new and formerly published poems for this collection, including "The New Yorker Poem," "Jungians & Freudians at the Joseph Campbell Lecture," and "Dancing with a De-Constructionist," verses that

fit the satirical category Yezzi proposes. Sex and love come to play in a section called "Decencies," while a "comic mode" is present, according to Yezzi, with such "delightful entertainments" as the poem titled "The Scribes," in which Blumenthal parodies the truism that everyone has one book in them by listing all the quotidian persons encountered who have written books. Judy Clarence, writing in *Library Journal*, also had praise for the collection, commenting that Blumenthal's style "is pure, simple, utterly accessible, loving, lyrical, and full of emotion."

In his novel *Weinstock among the Dying*, Blumenthal fashions a poet protagonist, a "disgruntled" Harvard professor, according to a contributor for *Publishers Weekly*. Initially, the title character's acerbic view of academic life is satiric; eventually, the novel spotlights Weinstock's struggle with his own history and identity. In the course of psychoanalysis, he comes to terms with the death of his adoptive aunt, deals with the truth of his biological parents, and learns to become a parent himself. A critic for *Publishers Weekly* found this to be a "graceful, wise, [and] moving" debut novel that was "resonant with meaning."

After a four-year position in Hungary as a Fulbright fellow, Blumenthal gathered fifty short essays – most of which had been published in magazines – in *When History Enters the House*. These articles range from difficulties with language and exile to an examination of the O. J. Simpson case. A critic for *Publishers Weekly* felt that the collection of essays made a "worthy book," but noted that it could also "have benefited from greater selectivity." *Booklist*'s Brad Hooper observed that the book "offers wide-ranging observations on current situations in Central Europe."

Blumenthal returns to subjects explored in his novel with the 2002 memoir *All My Mothers and Fathers*. Here he tells the story of his youth. He was born to chicken farmers in New Jersey who essentially gave him at birth to his aunt and uncle. Raised in Manhattan by these Holocaust survivors, he did not know until his aunt died and he was ten years old that he had been adopted. When his uncle remarried, Blumenthal encountered a stepmother who wanted no part of him. The result was a life-long inability to love as he would have wanted to. Amanda Heller, writing in the *Boston Globe*, felt that Blumenthal's "psyche still bears the open wounds" of this betrayal by his biological parents and the ill treatment by his stepmother. For Heller, such an ongoing open wound was "the weakness as well as the strength of this gripping memoir."

Norris Hounion, writing in *Library Journal*, called *All My Mothers and Fathers* a "touching story of [Blumenthal's] search for his true identity." Hounion found this account both "filled with humor" and "deeply moving." Writing in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Dan Benson compared Blumenthal's memoir to

*Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, noting that though *All My Mothers and Fathers* doesn't have the "raucous humor" of McCourt's work, still it does have a "fearful hopefulness," for Blumenthal finds a kind of salvation in the promise of his own son's life. As Whitney Scott concluded in *Booklist*, "Blumenthal's message and his source of comfort seem to be that love endures."

"I write poetry," Blumenthal once commented, "quite unashamedly, because I believe, as Howard Nemerov has said, that 'the beautiful is still among the possible,' and that it redeems us, and as a screen against (and a reminder of) my own wickedness and complexity. As for my poems, it seems to me that only they can speak of themselves."

## CAREER

Poet, educator, and attorney. Teacher of German, 1969-70; teacher of emotionally disturbed adolescents, 1970-71; Federal Trade Commission, Washington, DC, attorney, 1974-75; National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC, arts administrator, 1975-76; Time-Life Books, Alexandria, VA, editor, 1977-80; National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, DC, assistant to chairman, 1980-81; West German Television, Washington, DC, producer, 1981-83; Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, Briggs- Copeland lecturer in poetry and director of creative writing, 1983-92; senior Fulbright lecturer in American literature and editor, Central European University Press, Budapest, Hungary, 1992-96. Instructor in poetry and member of board of directors of Writer's Center, Glen Echo, MD, 1980-83; poet-in- residence at University of Louisville, spring, 1982; University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel, visiting professor of English, 1996-97; Boise State University, poet-in-residence; Free University of Berlin, visiting senior Fulbright professor, 1999-2000; Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, visiting professor of English; Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA, visiting professor, 2001; Universite Jean Monet, Saint-Etienne, France, Professor of American literature; Université François Rabelais, Tours, France, Université Sciences-Po, Paris, Visiting Professor of Creative Nonfiction, 2001; Acuff Distinguished Chair of Excellence, Austin Peay State University, Clarksville TN 2004-2005; Mina Hohenberg Darden Endowed Chair of Creative Writing, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA. 2006-present; Copenhaver Distinguished Visiting Chair, University of West Virginia Law School, spring, 2009; Visiting Professor of Law, West Virginia University College of Law, 2009-present

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- *When History Enters the House: Essays from Central Europe*, Pleasure Boat Studio (Port Angeles, WA), 1997.
- *All My Mothers and Fathers: A Memoir*, HarperCollins/Perennial (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Correcting The World: Selected Poetry and Prose of Michael Blumenthal*, Legal Studies Forum, West Virginia University Law School, 2007

Also translator of essays and poems from the Hungarian. Contributor to periodicals, including the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Harvard Review*, and the *Paris Review*, among others. His poetry is anthologized in *The Harvard Book of Contemporary Poetry*, Harvard University Press, 1985.

### FURTHER READINGS

#### BOOKS

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## MORE INFORMATION

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**Michael Blumenthal's** seventh book of poems, *And*, was published by BOA Editions in early 2009. Formerly Director of Creative Writing at Harvard, he is the author, most recently, of the memoir *All My Mothers and Fathers* (Harper Collins, 2002), and of *Dusty Angel* (BOA Editions, 1999). His novel *Weinstock Among the Dying* (which deals in part with the ongoing psychoanalysis of its protagonist) won Hadassah Magazine's Harold U. Ribelow Prize for the best work of Jewish fiction, and his collection of essays from Central Europe, *When History Enters the House*, was published in 1998. He is also editor of the volume, *To Woo and to Wed: Poets on Love and Marriage*, published by Poseidon Press in 1992.

Michael has been a practicing psychotherapist in Cambridge (MA), France and Budapest, working mainly with expatriates in Europe, in both English and German, and has written and published frequently about psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory. A frequent translator from the German, French and Hungarian, he currently holds the Darden Endowed Chair in Creative Writing at Old Dominion University, and spends the rest of the year as a therapist in Budapest and summers at his house in a small village near the shores of Lake Balaton in Hungary. In May of 2007, he spent a month in South Africa working with orphaned infant chacma baboons, an experience which he wrote about for *Natural History* and *The Washington Post Magazine*.