

Poets of Franklin County: Dennis Finnell



Greenfield poet Dennis Finnell. Recorder/Trish Crapo

By Trish Crapo
Monday, February 4, 2013
(Published in print: Saturday, February 2, 2013)

Greenfield poet Dennis Finnell admits that the poems in his new book, “Pie 8,” may not be the easiest reads. He smiles as he recalls that some friends to whom he’d given a copy phoned and asked, “Can you give us some guidance here?”

“Say them out loud, as if they were your own,” Finnell suggested. “Make them your own.”

Finnell, who worked on and off for roughly 20 years as an English professor, adviser and financial aid officer at Greenfield Community College before retiring, joked that he hasn’t heard back from his friends yet. “I hope the friendship hasn’t suffered because of it!”

Finnell’s advice for approaching his new poems by reading them aloud is meant to focus the reader — now listener — more on sound than on meaning. Speaking the words aloud helps them to enter through the ear, as well as the eye, Finnell said, making for a more complete apprehension. The word “apprehend,” which has its roots in Latin, is an interesting choice: It means literally, “to seize.”

“I think one of the aspects that appeals to people who like poetry is there’s something that connects you that, in a lot of ways, is ineffable. And what is it? It’s a sense that: ‘I recognize that somehow,’ or, ‘I didn’t realize that these kinds of things, or that feeling, existed until now.’”

In other words, if a poem reaches us, it's not so much that we "understand" it but that we are seized by it. A sensation or feeling arises from the poem and we experience that feeling.

But, smiling again, Finnell admits further that many of the poems in "Pie 8" are difficult to read aloud because of the "breaks and spaces."

Rather than sitting rigidly along the left margin, Finnell's words scatter across the page, leaving white spaces within the lines and stanzas that might be meant to represent silences.

"Yes, roughly," Finnell allowed. "But as you know, it's really a rough kind of measure. It's not like a musical measure where you've got these beats that you're counting."

In other words, there's no standard in poetry for how much white space equals how much pause.

"A lot of times the spacing is combining things or breaking them up a little bit to suggest a pause," Finnell said. "Maybe some kind of doubt, hesitation."

Finnell said he "made" the poems — a verb he chose consciously — by taking fragments and "starts" of poems that ranged over 20 years of work and "cutting away."

As in that old adage that a sculptor removes stone to reveal a hidden shape, Finnell removed words. He worked not only with his mind but "with the eye as well," trying to envision how the poem would look on the page.

"That's the leap I went into," Finnell said, pointing to a space on a page. "What if I just went from this word or phrase down to here?" He indicated where the next line picked up after the break.

"Some of the leaps surprised me and made me think of different ways to think about what I was trying to get at. Or — get at something new that wasn't there in the beginning."

Finnell asked himself, "What can I discover as I go along here? Is there some other kind of truth — understanding? Enjoyment? —that I can have with this as I take it apart?"

So in a process that begins to sound a bit like un-writing, Finnell was drawn to the leaps themselves — the spaces left by the words he'd removed, as much, or perhaps more than, the words that held down either side of them.

And yet, it's not as if Finnell's poems are uninhabited. They are often rich with visceral sensations and emotions, even narrators.

His poem "To Sit Down on a Tree Stump" grew from his experience living near the Connecticut River in Deerfield. "I remember working on that one," Finnell said. "The river was always there and so I thought of that. And then in the winter when the leaves were down, you could see the house across the river."

Finnell was struck by the simple rediscovery every winter that, “It’s been there all along, a white farmhouse standing.”

And within the house, unseen but sensed or assumed, are the “necessary strangers,” that are both near and far. The poem ends with the line, “Say nothing.” By the poem’s end, its narrator has reached what Finnell called “a speechless identity” with the strangers across the river, with the environment and with himself.

“Language has this practical, everyday use of communicating wishes or desires or needs or understandings, a kind of pedestrian use we all love and cherish,” Finnell said. “But there are lots of things that are on the border — incommunicable almost — and if you can hint at that, I think, with language, that can be powerful.”

“Pie 8,” from Bellday Books of Durham, N.C. and Pittsburgh, Pa., is available at the Greenfield Community College Bookstore and at World Eye Bookshop in Greenfield. “To Sit Down on a Tree Stump” is one of several poems Finnell recorded as sound files that will be posted soon on Bellday Books’ Web site.

Trish Crapo is a writer and photographer who lives in Leyden. One of the founders of Slate Roof, a member-run press publishing western Massachusetts poets, her chapbook “Walk through Paradise Backwards” was published by the press in 2004. Her poems have appeared in anthologies, in journals such as Southern Poetry Review and in Ted Kooser’s national column, “An American Life in Poetry.”