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Meet Your Neighbor and His Son

Earl and Allan Coleman

By Chris Retz

As I believe I've mentioned, Sherwood Court is home to several published writers, one of whom is Earl Coleman. Born in the Bronx, Earl has spent his life in the fields of publishing (he founded Da Capo and Plenum Presses) and creative writing. His career as a writer began with publication of a short story in *Esquire* in 1948 and he has gone on to publish more than 300 poems in journals such as *Mobius*, *RE:AL*, *Impetus*, *Midnight Mind*, *Thing Air*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *Hellas*, *Fuel*, *Long Shot*, *Red Rock*, *Nimrod*, *Whiskey*

Island, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, and *Poetry Motel*. He has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes XXIII and XXVII and Best American Short Stories.

Now, in collaboration with his first-born, Allan Coleman, Earl has published his third book of poetry, *Like Father, Like Son*. Allan was born in Brooklyn, and has been a writer since his adolescence. He received an MA in 1967 from the Creative Writing Program at San Francisco State College. Allan is a freelance cultural journalist under the pen name A. D.

Coleman, specializing in criticism of contemporary photography and the new digital technologies. He has published eight books of his critical texts in the *New York Times*, *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *New York Observer*, the *Village Voice*, and elsewhere.

Allan's short fiction, experimental prose, and poetry have appeared in *Creative Nonfiction*, *Assembling*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *BlackWater Review*, and other online and print journals. Since the mid 1990s he has read solo and along with Joyce Carol Oates, Daniel Halpern, Edmund Keeley, and others.

As Allan lives out of state, I decided to do a "virtual" interview, hoping to meet Allan someday in the not-too-distant future. I asked this remarkably skilled team a series of questions about their marvelous new book, as follows:

How did you come to do this collaboration?:

(E): Allan and I had had a dozen e-mails at least, just on the parlous state in which poetry finds itself today, where, instead of being part of everyday knowledge, to be used in ordinary parlance, it has to "slam" to be heard—arriving at last at a catchphrase "the going down," about which we had several more rounds of e-mails. We recognized this got us nowhere and wondered aloud if there wasn't something on which we could collaborate, and so hit on this joint publication.

(A): Earl and I exchange work with each other regularly, and talk frequently about writing and the process of getting published in the literary magazines. So we know each other's minds

and each other's work in a very up-to-date way. We had already collaborated for years on his Web site, *Stubborn Pine* (<http://nearbycafe.com/litandwriting/stubbornpine/index.html>), which has long been a featured component of my heavily trafficked Web site, *The Nearby Café* (www.nearbycafe.com).

As I mentioned in my self-introduction in the book, in the spring of 2005 I pulled together all my published poetry to see what it looked like as a collection. Earl's 90th birthday was less than a year away, and I wanted to find some way to celebrate the milestone. I'd always wanted to do a publication that at least I dedicated to Earl, but I didn't have a book of essays in the works. He hadn't done a book of poems in several years. So the concept of this project came to me as a way of resolving all that.

I proposed it, and Earl immediately agreed. It took longer than we expected. We finally got it out in December 2006, technically still in his 90th year. Our release date is April 30, 2007, a few months into his 91st. But who's counting?

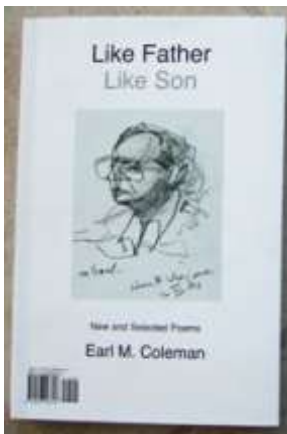
How did you decide which poems to include?

(E): At first I used rubrics: "The Gravity of Family," "Thunder on the Left," etc. I decided that didn't work, and so tried all-prose poetry (my latest crush, stylistically), but that didn't work. I then tried only those that hadn't yet seen print but that left out too many good ones so that didn't work. At last I decided on a kind of loose chronology by subject, without regard to whether they'd seen print before. Even this required shiftings for reasons of space, two-page poems (or more), a sense of placement for drama's sake, etc. At last I had a presentable manuscript. We pretty much kept at arm's length, assuming we both knew that we wanted at the end.

(A): We talked initially about doing a book that was thematic, centered around what we both see as the downward slide of our culture. And about alternating our poems within that structure—one of Earl's, one of mine. But he has many more poems on that subject than I do, so that didn't work. We also ended up feeling that the result would be too narrow in its relation to our range of interests. So then we settled on the 50-50 split—half the book Earl's, half of it mine.

My editing process was fairly simple. First, I decided to include only work I'd already published in various journals. (I made a few exceptions, when a piece seemed particularly apt for this book.) Then my selection from that menu revealed certain

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themes to which I keep returning, so it seemed appropriate to cluster those pieces and let them play off each other. My section consequently consists of a sequence of short “chapters,” each with a title: “Blood Ties,” “Specific Gravities,” e.g.

We tried a similar arrangement with Earl’s work, but he wasn’t comfortable with the result. So he ended up creating an intuitive sequence, we stuck to pretty much (aside from a minimal amount of tinkering to suit the layout).

As for picking the poems themselves, we each made our own cut of our own works. Then I created a rough dummy in AppleWorks, the word-processing program I used at that point, and dropped those poems in, so we could see approximately what that looked like, how it read. (And also what length it involved, in terms of number of pages). Looking over that draft let us see how much we needed to trim, and what could get cropped from both halves. It also let us see how the two halves worked together. We had some back-and-forth over what we each thought the other could leave out. Never an argument—a very untroubled dialogue. Any complementarity wasn’t actively planned, though probably inevitable. We’re very different people, but we live in the same culture, sharing aspects of a worldview, many reference points, and of course a long family history.

Tell me about the marvelously clever book design. Who came up with that idea?

(A): The design and cover concept came from me. I’ve designed a few limited-edition artist’s books for myself, but this was my first attempt to do a commercially published volume. I did the layout of the interior, and the cover design, in AppleWorks. (For the computer literate, I’ll add that we went directly from my AppleWorks files to the PDF files from which the printer ran the book, with a modicum of tweaking.)

When we decided to go with the half-and-half division of the contents, the question that arose for me, from the design standpoint, was who would get the back of the book? Not an ego issue, just an editorial choice. Did it make more sense to go from younger to older, or older to younger? I tried it both ways, didn’t like either. Then I recalled some books I knew with two “fronts” and no “back”—each half held upside down to the other, meeting in the middle of the book. Equally weighted, no priority. The perfect solution.

Tell me about your most recent public readings.

(E): I used to perform often (as Allan does now), but with the onset of macular degeneration about seven years ago I found that I was reading aloud with greater and greater difficulty, and quit—reluctantly. Now when I read aloud or teach I choose something brief, print it in 36-point type. That generally works, depending on the lighting of the venue itself. In my latest efforts I’ve felt the need of still larger type and may try that, although it interferes with the flow of sound and words.

(A): Here on Staten Island I perform regularly with two other poets, in a collaboration called “The Sepoy Rebellion.” We’ll do a performance in a local church in May. I’m also negotiating a date for a reading with both Earl and myself at the Every Thing Goes Book Café on Staten Island in late July. Around that time we’ll also appear on Luis Reyes’s radio show on WBAI 99.5FM I recently received a grant from the Council On the Arts & Humanities for Staten Island (COAHSI), and a fall ’07 solo performance will result from that.

(This interview will conclude next week with a discussion of modern poetry and influences.)

