

OUR NEWEST CHANCELLOR, DAVID KIRBY



Florida State Poets Association Chancellor David Kirby. Photography by Tracy Doering.

...SENSE IS WAY OVERRATED.
IT'S MORE IMPORTANT TO
STAY OPEN TO SURPRISES.
IT'S THE SOUND THAT COUNTS,
SPECIFICALLY, THE MUSICALITY.

– DAVID KIRBY

ABOUT DAVID KIRBY



David with Patsy on his lap. Photography by Barbara Hamby.

Poet, critic, and scholar David Kirby grew up on a farm in southern Louisiana. He received a BA from Louisiana State University and, at the age of 24, a PhD from Johns Hopkins University.

Influenced by artists as diverse as John Keats and Little Richard, Kirby writes distinctive long-lined narrative poems that braid together high and popular culture, personal memory, philosophy, and humor. “One thing that I want to do in the poems is to portray the mind as it actually works,” he stated in a 2007 interview with Craig Morgan Teicher.

Kirby is the author of more than thirty volumes of criticism, essays, children’s literature, pedagogy, and poetry. His numerous collections of poetry include *The Ha-Ha* (2003), short-listed for the Griffin Poetry Prize, and *The House on Boulevard Street: New and Selected Poems* (2007), a finalist for the National Book Award and winner of the Florida Book Award and the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance Award. In nominating *Boulevard Street*, the National Book Award committee noted, “Digression and punctiliousness, directed movement and lollygagging, bemusement and piercing insight are among the many paradoxical dualities that energize and complicate the locomotion of his informed, capacious consciousness.”

Kirby has also won several Pushcart Prizes, the James Dickey Prize, the Brittingham Prize, and the Millennium Cultural Recognition Award. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Florida Arts Council. His poetry has been featured in numerous anthologies, including several issues of *Best American Poetry*. In 2016, Kirby received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Florida Humanities, which called him “a literary treasure of our state.”

Kirby is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. Since 1969 he has taught at Florida State University, where he has received several teaching awards. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with his wife, poet and professor Barbara Hamby.

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III AL ROCHELEAU CHATS WITH DAVID

ON THE ART OF THE LINE, THE POET'S METHOD SURPRISING THE READER, WHY SENSE IS OVERATED, ON VIVALDI AND LITTLE RICHARD, AND MUCH MORE.

Rocheleau: Let me occupy an audience of one, spouting off accordingly. I've noticed that over the years your work has become looser. While you have always worked with long lines, you may not be nearly as interested now in the line itself, and exactly where things begin and end. Has that occurred to you, or it is just my fancy?

Kirby: I can give you a firm yes and no on that, Al. That is to say, I think an individual line is like a table leg or the slat of a chair, a part of the whole that should be perfect in itself and perfect in its contribution to the work overall. But a given line shouldn't be the boss of the rest of the poem. I try to make every line as smooth and straight and blemish-free as I can. But then my loyalty shifts to the poem as a whole. I'd never sacrifice the poem's integrity to the demands of a single line.

Rocheleau: I have also sensed over time you have worked your way back lyrically toward prose, albeit a kind of prose poetry not dependent on blocks. I also know you have done the opposite thing at some points, working specifically with shapes or patterns, just to mess up dumb analytical questions like this one regarding your method, but that's OK.

Kirby: You're right to say that I'm going in both directions at the same time. Yes, I did establish a signature look early on, but more and more these days, I'm trying to be both prosier on some days and more lyrical on others. I'm trying to surprise the reader, which means I'm always trying to come up with new strategies to surprise myself. It may come off differently to others, but I never think of even my prosiest work as prosey-prosey. I still try for musicality there, but it's more like the music of everyday speech than that of, say, a sonnet.

Rocheleau: A personal point: In your earlier work especially, but in what has also carried on to today, is that sort of detached, conscious streaming. While you're not the only one who does this, you do it effortlessly, gliding and quick like you're on a bobsled run. You've said you like to write like the mind itself works. For me, I get the same feeling reading you I got in my young twenties reading Vonnegut, especially the detached, observant, whimsical Vonnegut of *Breakfast of Champions*. Was it always that free and easy for you, going all the way back?

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Kirby: No. Back in the day, I was hampered by the notion that I had to make sense. Then I realized what all the great poets have realized, which is that sense is way overrated. It's more important to stay open to surprises. It's the sound that counts, specifically, the musicality. And guess what? If the sound is right, the sense comes through anyway, and it's usually a better sense than the plodding kind. But never the other way around: all by itself, sense per se just ain't musical.



Barbara and David at home.
Photography by Catherine Husum Taylor

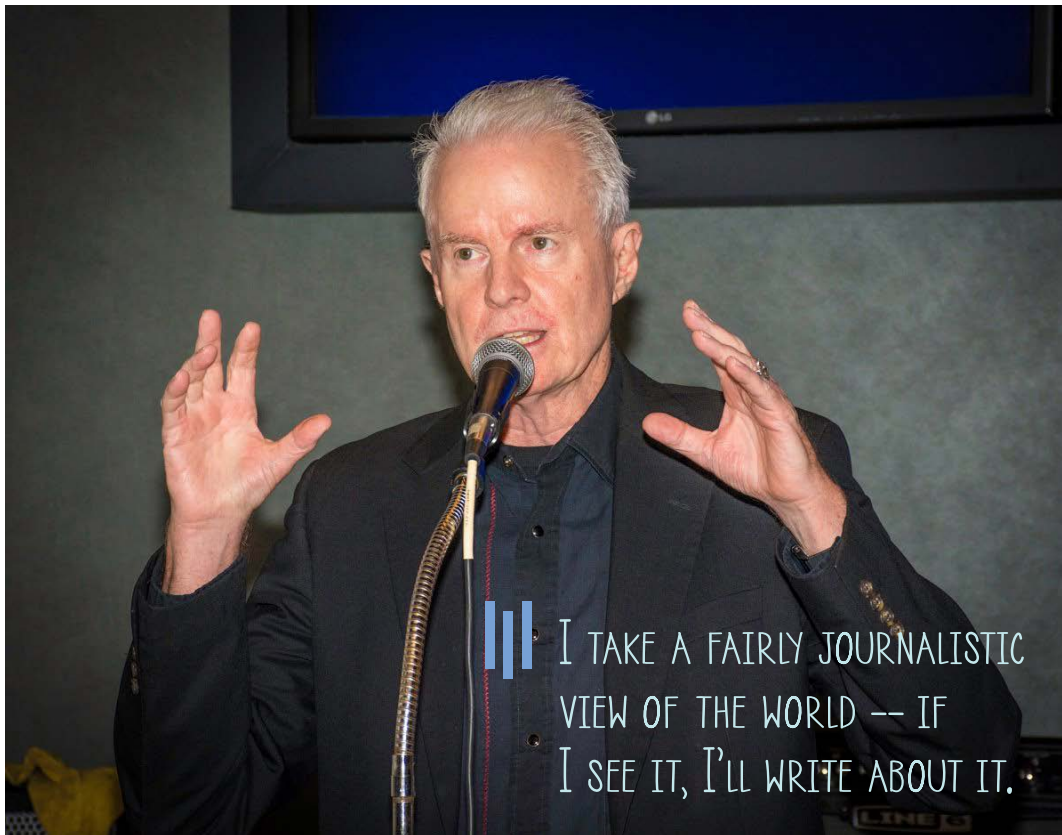
Rocheleau: Look out, obvious question: What has it been like over the years having another great poet in the house (your wife, Barbara Hamby)? Competitive, collegial, collaborative? Or do you lay such latinate words aside, along with the poetry itself, and just enjoy each other? (And don't worry, I will ask some shade of this question again when I hopefully interview Barbara for a future issue).

Kirby: Are you kidding? What could be more wonderful than for a poet to live with another poet? Of course, you have to love each other first, or then the relationship will turn competitive and toxic. You know, I think this is really a marriage question, not a poetry question. But the fact is that Barbara and I love each other and we talk poetry all day long every day. It's paradise.

Rocheleau: What is your take on the connection of philosophy and poetry? Not the high-minded treatise-based stuff, but just the poet's everyday look upon things, greater and lesser?

Kirby: I drive my more artsy students crazy when I tell them that to me a poem is a little problem-solving machine. So, yeah, you can't say "here comes some philosophy, folks!" But as a poet, you do move playfully towards Big Ideas. Those come secondarily. They're embedded in and borne along by the music of the poem, but that's what we do. We look at everything. The poetry store's always open – other stores may close when the sun goes down, but the poetry store's open 24/7.

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David Kirby speaking. Photography by Bob O'Lary

Rocheleau: Your career has been filled with various stops and residencies around the globe. How has the layout of those pins and strings over time informed your work?

Kirby: I've been lucky to travel as much as I have. And you've probably figured out that I take a fairly journalistic view of the world – if I see it, I'll write about it. I'm answering this question in the fall of 2020, which means only crazy people travel these days. And it's rough for me to stay at home. I love to lope across the face of this beautiful earth and talk to people and get chased by dogs and dip into art museums and buy a hot dog from the guy with the cart on the corner. Where's my damned passport, damn it!

Rocheleau: I once wrote a poem called "Artusi Attacks Modern Music," which started with an epigraph from Little Richard. (Giovanni Artusi's actual contemporary and target, out of the 16th century, was Monteverdi.) I do know you revere Richard Penniman as I do. Your own poems are filled with references to music and art, and to their purveyors. Do you draw a distinction between high and low art, or is it, to you, one gold thread winding through everything, whether pop or permanent?

Kirby: I see the distinctions, but I don't let them slow me down. Listening to Vivaldi and Little Richard make me feel equally dancy. I do recognize that
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Middlemarch makes me feel feelings and think thoughts that I don't feel or think when I read a Lee Child novel, but I love both. I'd die if I couldn't go to a French restaurant from time to time and eat a lovely piece of trout with a sorrel sauce, but I feel the same way about the five-buck barbecue I get from the guy with the roadside cooker. Your old-school aristocrats could paint and write sonnets and fight duels and go to war and woo members of the opposite sex with equal skill and fervor. Why should we not do our best version of that? There's too much to experience out there. Let's have it all.

Rocheleau: OK, here's just a standard question during which I am making an Old Fashioned, my pandemic standby, with my laptop on the sink. Poetry influences for you, aesthetic influences, non-aesthetic ones, personal ones? I like that you mention Keats, by the way. It's true that modern poets will sometimes drop a Donne or Keats just as credit to a way-dead emblem, but with you, as with Peter Meinke, I know it's not that.

Kirby: Recently I was in the audience as one of the great Muscle Shoals musicians was asked a question about influence. I think everyone expected him to say he was influenced by Ray Charles or B.B. King or Bo Diddley. But what he said was that the most important influence on his work was the guy standing next to him in the studio that day. Sure, I love Keats. He's my go-to. But on a given day, he might just leave me cold. That same day, I'll hear somebody say something as they pass me on the sidewalk that makes me feel as though I've stuck my finger in a wall socket. Be open, I tell my students. Be open to everything.

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Kirby accepting Lifetime Achievement Award (Little Richard Portrait). Photography by Bob O'Lary

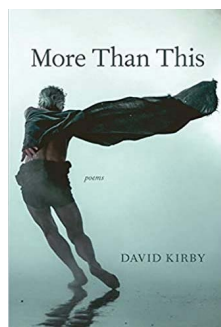
Rocheleau: What aggravates you about poets and about “The Poet Game?” (I love to call it that. There was a great play by that name from the early seventies, saw it on PBS while I was still a young prose writer, Anthony Hopkins playing you.)

Kirby: The poetic vices are pretty much the vices of any profession. It’s just as bad for a poet to bray about an acceptance from a choice journal as it is for an investment banker to boast about how big his bonus was last year. Anybody can be gauche. But probably the worst poetic vice is to think yours is the only way of doing things. Most of the poets I know are very generous and giving, but some are gatekeepers. That’s a mistake. In the right hands, a poem can be anything, and anything can be a poem. At least that’s what I told Tony Hopkins when I was helping him prepare to play me.

Rocheleau: What’s the very best little piece of advice you can give to a working poet that you consider is important, but that they likely haven’t heard?

Kirby: First thing I’d say is, listen. Don’t rush to judgment or to commit your words to paper. You can do that later. For the moment, just keep your ears open and make sure you’re not just hearing but really listening. After that, I’d say learn to tell a joke. Jokes have everything poems do: economy, timing, a crisp finish. Poems don’t have to be funny, though many are, but the best ones all have that same joke structure. As far as that goes, study improv. The one rule of improv is you never say “no,” only “yes and.” So when somebody says “when Jane was over at our house for dinner, did you notice she had spinach in her teeth?” a non-poet might say “what are you talking about?” A poet would say “yes, and we weren’t even serving spinach.” You never know where a good joke’s going, but it always knocks you off your feet. Same with a good poem.

**RECENT RELEASE
BY DAVID KIRBY**



BUY THE BOOK



Kirby with Japanese school children. Photography by Barbara Hamby



Mary Weiss of the Shangri-Las Explains It All to You

A student I haven't seen for months stops by to say hello,
and she's wearing a sundress, and when she gets up to leave,
I see she has a tattoo on her shoulder, so I say, "Hold on
a sec, let me take a look," and when I see
it says, "Poetry is not reflection; it is refraction," I say, "I like that,"

and she says, "You should. You said that in the first class
I took from you." It's times like this that I impress myself.
Not for long, though: the more interesting thing to think
about is not my excellence but the process whereby
we turn our experiences into art that moves others, to do, for example,

what Mary Weiss of the Shangri-Las did when she sang "Leader
of the Pack," recalling "I had enough pain in me, at the time,
to pull off anything. And to get into it, and sound—believable."
We believe you, Mary. Mainly because you're so
restrained when you sing that song, as though you're not really bothered

by the fact that the love of your life has just roared away
on his motorcycle only to be turned into a pile of hamburger
somewhere out on Highway 30. Restraint: that's the thing,
isn't it? Discipline. Self-command. The more
he wrote songs, the more Burt Bacharach's music took odd turns,

became clipped and staccato, offbeat. "One-level records
always made me a little bit uncomfortable after a while,"
he says. "They stayed at one intensity. It kind of beats you up,
you know? It's like a smile. If you have a great
smile, you use it quick, not all the time." Burt Bacharach sounds

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like a smart guy. You have to trust the listener to pick up
on the little thing, to change and color it
until it's the biggest part of the song, even though it's the smallest.
And the least true, maybe, in the factual sense.
I don't remember telling my class about reflection and refraction,
but if I did, I was freeing the students from the absolute need
to reflect their world and telling them that
what they refracted was theirs to make, that you can disconnect
your image from reality. Mary Weiss says,
"The recording studio was the place where you could really release
what you're feeling without everybody looking at you." And the poem
is the place where we poets do the same. Everybody
listened to Mary Weiss—that song was number one
on the pop charts in 1964—and we poets, too, want
to lose ourselves in our early poem drafts so we can write and rewrite
and revise until the poem is so good that everybody loves it,
whether or not they actually end up doing so. When I ask
my former student what other tattoos she has, she says
that's the only one, and when I say, "Wow,
it means that much to you, huh?" she says no, it really hurt.

~ David Kirby



More Than This

When you tell me that a woman is visiting the grave
of her college friend and she's trying not to get irritated
at the man in the red truck who keeps walking back and forth
and dropping tools as he listens to a pro football
game on the truck radio, which is much too loud, I start
to feel as though I know where this story is going,
so I say Stop, you're going to make me cry.
How sad the world is. When young men died in the mud
of Flanders, the headmaster called their brothers out
of the classroom one by one, but when the older brothers
began to die by the hundreds every day, they simply handed
the child a note as he did his lessons, and of course the boy
wouldn't cry in front of the others, though at night
the halls were filled with the sound of schoolboys sobbing
for the dead, young men only slightly older than themselves.
Yet the world's beauty breaks our hearts as well:
the old cowboy is riding along and looks down
at his dog and realizes she died a long time ago
and that his horse did as well, and this makes him
wonder if he is dead, too, and as he's thinking this,
he comes to a big shiny gate that opens onto a golden
highway, and there's a man in a robe and white wings,
and when the cowboy asks what this place is, the man tells
him it's heaven and invites him in, though he says animals
aren't allowed, so the cowboy keeps going till he comes
to an old rusty gate with a road full of weeds and potholes
on the other side and a guy on a tractor, and the guy
wipes his brow and says you three must be thirsty,

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come in and get a drink, and the cowboy says okay,
but what is this place, and the guy says it's heaven,
and the cowboy says then what's that place down
the road with the shiny gate and the golden highway,
and when the guy says oh, that's hell, the cowboy
says doesn't it make you mad that they're pretending
to be you, and the guy on the tractor says no,
we like it that they screen out the folks who'd desert
their friends. You tell me your friend can't take it
any more, and she turns to confront the man
who's making all the noise, to beg him to leave her alone
with her grief, and that's when she sees that he's been
putting up a Christmas tree on his son's grave
and that he's grieving, too, but in his own way,
one that is not better or worse than the woman's,
just different, the kind of grief that says the world
is so beautiful, that it will give you no peace.

~ David Kirby



A World in Which These Things Happen

The Ionian Sea, noon to early evening

Driving onto the ferry at Patra isn't difficult
because there's nowhere to go except onto the ferry,
though once you're on, the trouble starts: the guy
who is guiding you into place not only wants you to back

your car into a space exactly the size of the car itself
but also wants you to watch him, not the cars
on either side, so he stands facing you with his hands
on an invisible steering wheel that he turns all the way

to the right, and you don't know whether that means
you should turn to the right, which is his left, or whether
he wants you to think of him as a mirror
image and turn the wheel to the left, a choice that would be

clear if he were to face away from you, though
then he couldn't see you and the car would never
get parked or at least parked correctly,
which it does eventually, meaning you're free now to go up

on deck and look at all the other ships as you chug out
of the harbor, and as you do, you wonder if these
beat-up freighters have something on
them they shouldn't—a duffel full of heroin, a shipping

container loaded with AKs, a body—but even if they
don't, you're no more the kind of person who wants
to live in a world where such things are
unimaginable than you are the kind who, when the car ferry

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reaches Vathi, doesn't do everything he did to get on board
in the first place, only this time in reverse, so that
by now you're more than ready to take a little
something at the port café where the only empty seat is next

to a guy who's maybe eighty and has a houndstooth fedora
and the kind of tinted glasses favored (at least in movies)
by Baltic spies, and after a few minutes,
you're absolutely certain that he is about to say I understand

the cheese pies are excellent here in Vathi and you'll
wait a bit and say Yes but they are even better
in Frikes and he'll say The oracle speaks, yet
the priest cannot shoe his horse and you'll say My wife's uncle

is sick because the highway is green and finally he'll say
Just tell us where the stolen art is buried or When
does the invasion begin or Who abducted
the prime minister, and that's when you realize how little

you understand anything about anything, which
is okay, because if you had to understand everything,
the world wouldn't work at all, though
you're fairly certain that if one part of this endless day

were to change, then the whole day would change
and you as well, that you might even disappear,
that he might say fruit pies
instead of cheese pies and poof, like that, you're gone.

~ David Kirby