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Chronicler of the World, Troubadour of the Soul
Authors: James McMichael is a poet's poet. Yet he lives quietly--almost invisibly--in Irvine, where he turns out his deeply affecting verses about life and death, love and the absence of it.

By **JANET WISCOMBE**
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

James McMichael, one of the nation's preeminent poets, is seated at the kitchen table of his pinky-beige suburban condo talking about being a single parent raising a teenage son.

He is framed, not by volumes of Walt Whitman or William Blake, but by a wallpaper border of achingly cheerful sunflowers. The surroundings are more about decor than food.

McMichael confesses sadly that he isn't much of a cook. He and his son never eat together. They never talk. His son prefers the company of his friends and the atmosphere at Del Taco. Then there's McMichael's girlfriend. Well, his former girlfriend. She's packing up her clothes, some of the plants and rattan furniture, and moving out on Friday.

"Relationships tend to get harder as you get older," says the 57-year-old bard."But nothing feels as good as being settled--two people having separate days and then coming together.

"I want a mate."

It is the plain-spoken declaration of a man who defies stereotype, a distinguished professor who talks--and writes--with breathtaking intimacy about ordinary things: houses, marriage, children, insomnia, real estate, stamp collecting, trout streams, computer chips, map making, lovemaking.
It is the simple remark of a twice-divorced father of three who grew up in Pasadena, drives a Toyota Tercel and rarely ventures beyond the bland housing colony on the UC Irvine campus where he lives--except to play golf.

Above all, it is the unself-conscious comment of a man of letters who writes prose-like narratives about the human experience, a rather obscure Southern California writer who just happens to be known in elite literary circles as one of the best living poets in the Western world.
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She's at the mirror. I need to get behind it to the aspirin,
do so, close it.
"Goodness you wake up with a lot of headaches."
"Sorry."
"Don't be sorry, I'm sorry for you."
Surprised that it turned out like that, and
hating her, hating what I'd heard in my own voice,
I get out of her way. From the privacy of

brooding on it in another room, I hear what she meant:
"Congratulations. As good as you are at headaches,
why settle for so little, why not work up a
malignancy of some kind?" And I remember that
yesterday, when we were getting in the car, she winced.
She's always twisting her neck or back or something,
so I didn't ask her "Did you hurt yourself?" but
"Did you hurt yourself again?"

Outside of English departments on college campuses, almost no one has heard of James McMichael. He is not a showman. He's about as likely to seize a microphone at a coffeehouse poetry reading as a coyote is to meow at the moon. He doesn't do drugs or bongos.

He is a charming, unpretentious man with a tidy beard, precise handwriting and Presbyterian roots. He plays golf alone. His handicap is 1.

Oh, and another thing. He's afraid of flying, a phobia that hasn't exactly helped land him on the literary map.

Against this backdrop, it's easy to imagine his astonishment when he recently asked for a copy of his new book, a collection of poems titled "The World at Large," at Borders Books and Music in Mission Viejo. He was told they were sold out.

They had sold six copies.

McMichael is still slightly drunk with delight. "I love it. I love it," he says with an ebullient grin. "It makes me feel less crazy. Six people in Mission Viejo bought my book. I find that remarkable. I want to meet them."

Apparently, two more copies are on order. It's not double-digit math, not the kind of count that elicits big dates or big bucks. But for an academic who's lived a life of virtual obscurity, it's a distinct pleasure.

This is not to say that McMichael has been pining away in an office all these years, undiscovered and unappreciated. Distinguished poets are huge fans. Robert Pinsky, named U.S. poet laureate in March, calls his colleague and friend "a very great genius."

"He has no talent for self-promotion," Pinsky says. "He is extremely original, but he's not out there peddling his work like many other American poets." Adds poet Alan Shapiro: "{McMichael} is absolutely brilliant. He is one of the most important contemporary poets in the country. Period."

Despite a domestic life that could use repair, McMichael is an openhearted man who laughs easily and communicates a love of learning and a zest for life.He relates that in a recent phone conversation, Pinsky, who is a professor at Boston University, referred to him as a person who is "indifferent to haberdashery."

He's still laughing.

What's really amazing to McMichael is that UCI is willing to be his patron: "I'm paid to

find my interests and say what they are on a page. I'm miraculously entertained. I don't make compromises about what I make of the world."

To understand this man--a teacher described by students as someone who knows simply everything--one must return to Pasadena, where he was born and reared. It is still one of his favorite poetic haunts, a place he frequents on the page to talk about everything from piano lessons to Caltech.

Pasadena is also the place where the unthinkable happened, an event that would become a pervasive theme in his work. His mother died of cancer when he was 11.
*
She was back in the hospital. My father saw her
every day. Though she was usually about the same,
tonight she was better. He took me to the
Crown Cafeteria, my favorite place to eat.
Waiting for the light so we could cross Colorado,
he said she'd died. The stairs to his office echoed.
Through the front windows we looked out over the street.
I was sitting in his lap in the big swivel chair.
"But you said she was better."
"She IS better. This is better."
*
When McMichael was in his early 30s, his father shared an essay he'd written about his marriage to McMichael's mother. His father, a real estate salesman, had made only one reference to him, his only child: "You must have had a halo around your whole body we loved you so much."
After his mother's death, his father remarried, and McMichael went to live with his new stepmother and her four children.
*
My father seemed as lost to me as if he'd died.
It didn't matter what I felt. We had become
conspicuously a family with any family's
collective will. I'd go on living with them
in a house that they had lived in first.
*
Until he was a student at UC Santa Barbara, McMichael was far more interested in baseball than poetry. He was 20 when he wrote his first poem, considered old in his line of work. He made up for it quickly, capturing the attention of teachers whose careful attention helped propel him to graduate school at Stanford.
He was hired at UCI in 1965, the year the school opened its doors, and he was a founder of its prestigious program in writing.
But it was the devastating loss of his mother that both defined his destiny and set him free. After she died, he says, he probably spent more time alone than a lot of children do. Being alone forced him to think his own thoughts and develop strong interests--in philosophy and science, history and politics, religion and economics, art and architecture.
Long before anyone was writing about computers, and not long after Bill Gates made his cameo at Harvard, McMichael was exploring the astounding volume of information that can be stored in a tiny computer chip.
*
Because it's small, because our

maps for it are much
larger than its surface, we've learned to print in
silicon, on chips, an integrated
plane of
microchannels, spurs and gates . . .
We watch it as we watch ourselves,
expectantly, afraid that in the calculus of
pain and pleasure, at the scale of 1:1, we're not
happy enough. To be happy, we have to be sure.
*
In real life, McMichael doesn't own a computer. He's the only person in the English department who doesn't use one. He doesn't have an e-mail address. He doesn't use an ATM.

"It just doesn't interest me," he says. "I am not interested in things that separate us from each other. It doesn't seem like the way to act.

"There are computer hackers in Tokyo who rob databases and sell all the names. They have pizza delivered through doggy doors and will not come out.

"Not having a computer isn't a political campaign for me," he adds. "I just don't want to use one. My students don't have to reach me through a keyboard. They have my phone number. They are welcome to call."

But the focus of his most abiding attention is people, what they do and how they feel.In poetry and conversation, the subjects of worry and control never stray far. He says people worry and want to control--things, places, each other--as a way of warding off anxiety and fear.
Americans are particularly prone to anxiety, he says: "Capitalism is based on plans. It is reflected in the lengths we go to to chart the future, to map and plan everything from cities and families to war and sex."

By creating the illusion of control and order, he says we like to think we're protecting ourselves from loss and hurt. When we're stoic, we aren't so vulnerable. We try to create permanence and safety so we won't be at the mercy of the world, a world where people hurt each other and mothers die.
*
With my conception, I was virtually
coincident with cancer in my mother's body.
To exist is to be placed outside, where there are
things to fear. My body. Me . . .
Everything I worry is secure,
familiar, almost home. Its difference is mine and not the world's . . .
My worrying and fear are notices that I don't
have a place outside and don't know how to
find or make one. They are as free of people as a
garden is, or as a plan.
*
As a poet, McMichael describes himself as a night watchman. "I don't want to miss anything," he says. "It comes from the wonder of it all." Poets, he says, are marginal characters. Still, they probably give us things we can draw on. "Poets say things out of

their hearts. When we read a poem, we feel in tune with someone. We feel a connection to that person.

"People have in their minds that poems are forbidden, unclear, difficult, boring," he adds. "They really aren't. A poem 'sings' out of the first person. A poem is one voice. It's like the voice of a friend."

From his chair below the sunflowers, McMichael wonders about how to raise children, how men and women are different, how unpredictable and treacherous life's journey can be. He wishes he and his son could talk better.

Still, for all of the worry, all of the vulnerability and feelings of self-doubt, James McMichael is a man with great affection for people. He writes about the profound human desire for connection and how it feels to be separate, apart.
*
He writes about babies. He writes about love.

. . . Where
is she, that good slaking mother? This one is
looking now again, that's better, good,
one's own smile shows in hers sent
back to one, and so on. After
long enough, there aren't
two mothers anymore, there's one whose
badness one says no to as one also says you
papa, you blue apron, you my lamb.

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