

An Interview with Don Unger, author of pulp-fiction "Cannibalistic Sexbot" trilogy...

You've taught Kindergarten through Graduate School. Of these, which "class" of students did you find to be the most inspiring? And why?

I taught in the Writing Across the Curriculum Program at MIT for almost eight years. Essentially: Writing lecturers were integrated into tech classes; those classes were tagged as “writing intensives”; students needed a certain number of those classes to graduate.

The MIT “kids” were smart, of course. But they were also impressively idealistic. I often felt like either our technology is going to kill us . . . or those students are going to invent new tech to save us from our old tech.

While I’m pretty solidly a “liberal arts” person, my father was a professor of computer science—got his doctorate at MIT, in electrical engineering because, in the 1950s, comp-sci did not yet exist as a field—and I literally “grew up around engineers.” In fact, my father was really my first effective writing teacher. Engineers talk about “elegant design” as much as “efficient solutions.”

I recall at the beginning of a writing intensive lab course in medical device engineering, the professor—who was perhaps in his early thirties, South Asian, with a British accent and an Elvis pompadour, an Armani suit and cowboy boots—proclaimed that, “With some justification, engineers are often viewed as smelly, poorly socialized people who can’t write. None of those things are acceptable.”

What did you teach at the University of Albany-SUNY?

I taught a full slate of classes—mostly writing, some lit—for two years as a visiting professor in the English Department.

I grew up in and around New York City and the students were kind of an Up State/Down State split, which I very much enjoyed. It was also nice to be there long enough to have a few students want to take more than one class from me.

The lit classes were also a nice change of pace, not my usual thing. I taught a 19th Century American Lit class, for example, focused on “Utopias and Dystopias.” That was a lot of fun.

I also taught a class (that fulfilled a multi-culti req) on [“Growing Up in America.”](#) The stories the students had were as interesting as the works we read.

What is the Princeton Arts Review and how did you come about "founding" it?

I lived in Princeton for two years (1990-1992, while my wife was ABD from Michigan and working on her doctoral dissertation). I taught creative writing classes for adults at the Arts Council of Princeton. When I left, a core group of my students took over and continued the workshops as sort of a collective. They charged a nominal fee and that money—perhaps literally—just accumulated in a shoebox for a while.

They decided it would be a good expansion of the project to start a literary magazine. They asked me to be the “founding editor” and fiction editor. We published perhaps half a dozen issues over a period of a couple of years—essentially in chapbook format. I’m proud of the work, but we were never really able to sell a

meaningful number of copies and had to give it up.

You have a BA in Literature/Writing, an MFA in Fiction, and a PhD in English. All of these were obtained at different institutions. What was your intended goal in obtaining your various degrees?

Sigh . . .

I barely graduated high school; I just hated being there: by my junior year, I often simply signed tests and handed them back.

Ironically, the first short story I had published in a national magazine was written in an Algebra II class (which I was taking for the third time; I got my diploma when I took it a fourth time, the summer after I was supposed to graduate). It came out a year after I had finished high school. I went back and gave a copy of the magazine to my math teacher.

One of her signature lines had been, “What are you DOING in my class.”

“This is what I was doing in your class,” I told her.

“Well I’m glad you were doing SOMETHING!” was her response.

I did an eight-year BA at Columbia—part time for six years while I did various kinds of work. Not foolish enough to think that writing could be relied upon for income, I trained as a high school teacher. I needed a master’s degree for permanent certification; I figured an MFA would be a good compromise: I’d get the degree, plus have two years to write my first (unpublishable) novel.

After that, it felt like there were mass firings of high school teachers (for budgetary reasons) wherever I lived. I began getting adjunct work teaching writing classes at colleges. That paid less than what a unionized grocery bagger earns—with less job security.

I began fuming that I would earn more teaching the same classes as a graduate student, if I were to go back to school to work on a doctorate. That was true. Earning the PhD improved my job prospects but not much.

The “deal” that my wife and I made was that she would have the anchor job; she is a tenured full professor (of Spanish) and will chair her department, come July. Our daughter is twenty-three now, soon to return from a post-grad year in Russia (teaching English and studying Russian). In the fall, she’ll be in a master’s program at Columbia.

In that sense, things have worked out for us as a family unit—though less so for me than for my wife and daughter.

Cue Meatloaf: [“Two Outta Three Ain’t Bad.”](#)

You’ve also written for Wharton? Could you explain?

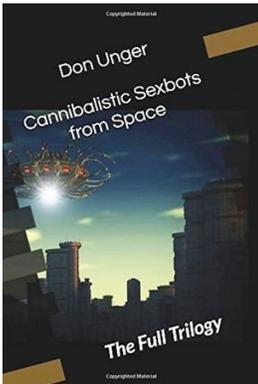
In the 1990s, one of my students from the Arts Council founded something of a publishing empire called [Knowledge@Wharton](#)--which now publishes globally in multiple languages. In the last couple of years, they’ve brought most of the work “in-house,” but for almost two decades I did freelance work for them.

I really enjoyed doing book reviews.

But, in general, interviewing business faculty and execs, writing about things like [“the impact of gun violence on insurance rates”](#) or [“reasons women get paid less.”](#) was fascinating. Having grown up around academics, I

had something of an indifference toward commerce and economics. To get paid to study those things, to learn how finance is sort of the “invisible plumbing” that runs so much of our lives, was wonderful.

What inspired you to write the [*Cannibalistic Sexbots from Space*](#) trilogy?



I left MIT (I was “non-renewed”) a few years ago. Since then—with my daughter out of the house, then out of college, then out of the country—I’ve tried to view my wife as “a grant.”

I get room and board and health insurance (and love and affection and companionship) and I . . . get to write whatever I want (as long as dinner is ready when my wife gets home).

Sexbots is kind of a “pulp mash-up,” sci-fi, thriller, government conspiracy, black/white cop bromance, mostly set in NYC and in an underground bunker outside Atlanta.

Perhaps a little “cartoony,” it’s sort of the ultimate expression of “really not giving a _____” and just going hard and loose at “and then what could possibly happen?” not feeling burdened by “what will people think or say?”

I think that freedom is both the greatest blessing and the most dangerous pitfall in the burgeoning self-publishing industry (there’s a reason we used to call that “vanity press”).

What prompted the "*Men Can*" book?



My PhD is in English with a specialization in Composition/Rhetoric. I “went back to school” when my daughter was two-and-a-half (having spent two years at home as primary parent).

I’m generally a pretty irritable person. In the late 1990s, being one of a very few fathers in a circle of mothers was enraging on a regular basis. Men kind of get whipsawed between, “why don’t men do more to care for their children?” and “why is that guy always hanging around the park?”

If the class is called “Mommy & Me,” it’s hard to feel like you and your child are really being invited in.

I needed to write a diss that focused on language; Anne Lamott has written that, “we write from our wounds.” My twist would be “we theorize from our irritations.”

The diss was called, “The Evolution of Gender-Neutral Language: [*Can Fathers Mother?*](#)”



In 2010 (nine years after I earned my PhD), a heavily revised and supplemented version was published by Temple University Press, as [*Men Can: The Changing Image & Reality of Fatherhood in America.*](#)

Where did you get your stories for "[*Brokenhearted Ironies*](#)"?

I had a short story collection that had been my undergraduate thesis at Columbia; I had another batch that I had written in the MFA program at Michigan; the collection draws from those sources and other work I’ve done since. Almost all of those stories were originally published in magazines in the US, Canada, and Europe.

*You also have done journalistic work for *The Boston Globe*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Village Voice*, among others. Were these columns or single-subject “one shots”?*

A little of both. Before and after my daughter’s birth, I had a column in a local paper called “Dads & Diapers.” For a while I was a pretty regular contributor to our local “alternative weekly,” Worcester Magazine.

Mostly, though, I get commissioned to do something or I get irritated and “spew” a piece or I’m trying to figure out some way to subsidize travel: my daughter and I are doing ten days in the Balkans; who can I interview in Croatia?

On the irritable side, as someone with chronic pain issues, the “opioid crisis” and the ways in which it is just crushing people like me has been a recent topic, both in popular venues, like the [Boston Globe](#) and in professional pubs like the [Journal of General Internal Medicine](#).

One of the pieces in the Village Voice partially subsidized a trip to Argentina, when I was in grad school and doing research for my first novel.

I was also a regular [NPR radio commentator](#) for a few years

Any “words of wisdom” you’d care to shed upon inspiring writers yet to be published?

You need a kind of split personality: You have to be wildly egocentric—to believe that what YOU have to say is “worthy” of an audience (never mind financial compensation); and you have to be willing to have the ego just crushed out of you by the realities of publishing.

I don’t think writing (I don’t think “artistic production” generally) is volitional activity. Some of us have this “disease.” We manage it the best we can . . .

Do you offer signed copies of your books and if so, how would a prospective fan obtain one?

Happy to do that! I’m easily reached to work out details: donunger@hotmail.com



Donald N.S. Unger, MFA, PhD
Writer - Teacher - Editor

Formerly a lecturer in the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies at MIT.

Have worked, as well, among other places, as a Visiting Professor at the University at Albany-SUNY, in the English department, and at the College of the Holy Cross, in both English and Gender Studies. I'm interested in changes in the representation of men, masculinity, and fatherhood in both language use and in popular culture--more or less during my lifetime (b. 1962, NYC).

I also dabble in environmental ranting, humor and something pretty close to pulp fiction.

Then there are political fulminations - one current favorite: the impact of various species of "The Drug War" on people (like me) in chronic pain: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/02/03/chronic-pain-isn-crime/hTqwaGVgwX3YpDkXUJMsfl/story.html>

My short fiction has been published in literary magazines in the US, Canada and Europe.

Among other places, my nonfiction work has appeared in The Boston Globe, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Village Voice, and Knowledge@Wharton, and its affiliated sites.

I've done political and cultural commentary for the NPR affiliates in Amherst, Massachusetts and Albany, New York.