

# An interview with Tom Robbins

With acclaimed author Tom Robbins making his way to his old hometown of Warsaw in the coming weeks, Dan Ream, coordinator for the Rappahannock Community College Library was able to speak with Robbins recently in an exclusive interview.

**Dan Ream:** When did you move to Warsaw, how long did you live here, and how do you feel living here may have influenced your life and writing career?

**Tom Robbins:** I descended on Warsaw in the sixth grade and resided there happily for the next eight years. As for local influences, I'm certain the place reinforced my already dominant comic sensibility, being surrounded as I was in Warsaw by any number of very witty, very funny individuals, some of whom also reinforced my tendency toward non-conformity.

**DR:** Since leaving Warsaw, have you stayed in touch with friends here or visited often?

**TR:** For at least a decade after my family moved, I maintained a relationship with friends in Warsaw and visited at every opportunity, though in time the bonds loosened. I did return for a class reunion in 1979, and also spent a long weekend on Bernard Packett's farm before he passed away about a dozen years ago. Obviously, the town modernized in my long absence, but while the intrusion of fast-food franchises somewhat disheartened me, I was elated to see that the B&B poolroom still flourished.

**DR:** Have you ever used Warsaw or the Northern Neck as a setting in any of your novels or essays?

**TR:** No, I have not. I really don't know why -- but you should count your blessings.

**DR:** Are there foods, smells, or songs that still remind you of your days in Warsaw when you experience them today?

**TR:** There are certain old songs, highly romantic in nature, that transport me instantly to the Warsaw High School gymnasium and the Friday night Cotillon Club dances. Ah, such sweet sorrow, such adolescent yearning! I can still smell the White Shoulders cologne and the Wild Root Cream Oil.

**DR:** You have written about working as a teenager as a tomato picker and a circus hand. What other jobs did you have before becoming a writer?

**TR:** As an adult, virtually all of my gainful employment has been on the staff of newspapers, including the Richmond Times-Dispatch and both Seattle dailies. Incidentally, having dictated my first story to my mother at age five, I suppose I've pretty much always been a writer.

**DR:** When you were growing up, were you an avid reader? Were your parents? Did you have a public library here in Warsaw back then that you can recall.

**TR:** My mother, herself, had harbored literary ambitions, contributing stories and poems to Southern Baptist



Tom Robbins in 1948

magazines, and my father, though poorly educated, was an avid reader. He read Huckleberry Finn aloud to me when I was seven -- and it remains my all-time favorite novel.

There was, indeed, a tiny public library in Warsaw in the Forties, right in the center of town, and the library, the movie theater, and the B&B pool room were my personal temples, my fountains of knowledge.

**DR:** Did you have any favorite teachers, writers or role models that influenced you profoundly?

**TR:** My major influences have been Spanish poets, French film-makers, Asian philosophical systems of personal liberation, and those novelists, from James Joyce to Henry Miller, who care -- really care! -- about language.

**DR:** Your writing shows a great sense of humor. What makes YOU laugh?

**TR:** The nightly news, although it can also make me recoil in disgust. Occasionally, both at the same time.

**DR:** What was your first published work? Did you write for the Northern Neck News?

**TR:** In the second grade, I boldly submitted a story to the high school newspaper. Amazingly, it was published -- and I never looked back. As a teenager, I indeed covered high school basketball and Warsaw's semi-pro baseball team for the Northern Neck News.

**DR:** You have lived in La Conner, Washington for many years now. Why do you like living there?

**TR:** Like Warsaw, picturesque little La Conner is a rural farming and fishing community, an atmosphere in which I'm very comfortable. Moreover, since artists have resided there since 1937, La Conner is also quite sophisticated, unusually tolerant of eccentric dress and behavior.

**DR:** Is it true that you're a connoisseur of mayonnaise? If so, tell us your favorite brand and what sets it apart from the others.

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TR: Mayonnaise, as far as I'm concerned, is the ambrosia of the gods. For whatever reason, a jar of Duke's is to tomatoes and bread what the fat lady is to the finale of an opera: it brings the experience to a grand culmination.

DR: Do you have any favorites among the books and essays you've written? Do you ever read your books again once they are published?

TR: Jitterbug Perfume is my most popular book, but I'm not sure it's the best. Even Cowgirls Get the Blues, is the most famous, doubtlessly because Hollywood filmed it, and movies, unfortunately, are sexier than books. My favorite is always the one I'm working on next, though at present I'm under a self-imposed restraining order. As for re-reading them, I've been saving that for my golden years (if my golden years have not already come

and gone).

DR: One critic called you the most dangerous writer in the world today. Are you?

TR: I was flattered, but can only wish that it were true.

DR: Based on your writings and public appearances, you seem to be a cheerful, enthusiastic person. What do you think accounts for your upbeat attitude?

TR: Life is simply much too short, much too goofy, to be squandered in self-indulgent lamentation. Humor can be both a form of wisdom and a means of survival in a threatened age, and the biggest mistake we can make is taking ourselves too seriously.

DR: What is a typical day in the life of Tom Robbins in 2015? Do you write everyday?

TR: Sitting around waiting for inspiration is for amateurs. I sequester myself in my writing room at ten a.m., and work there

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(slowly, very slowly) until the blood-sugar elves bang the lunch gong. Afternoons are devoted to polishing the morning's output, then to exercise: I workout twice a week with a woman who used to train acrobats and aerialists for Cirque du Soleil. It keeps me supple and vicariously feeds my circus fantasies. Evenings, I read, study Zen, maybe carouse a bit.

DR: When you were invited to come to Warsaw in October to share your latest book and talk about your years here, why did that appeal to you?

TR: I wanted to prove Thomas Wolfe wrong when he wrote, "You can't go home again."

DR: What do you enjoy about being 83 years old?

TR: When you're 83, girls no longer try to pick you up and guys no longer try to pick a fight with you. Obviously, it's a mixed blessing.

DR: Your 2013 singing performance of your song "Honkey Tonk Astronaut" in a PuppetFace video was lots of fun to watch. Will there be other musical performances?

TR: For all of humanity's shortcomings, I care too much about it to subject it to anymore of my vocalizing.

DR: What do you hope to do in the future that you haven't done yet?

TR: I want to zip on one of those new zip lines in the Costa Rican rainforest, yodeling my Tarzan yell as I whiz, scattering parrots and monkeys, through the foliage.