

Hiram Interview with Elyse Pitkin, June 21, 2023

Q: When did you attend Hiram College and what degree did you pursue?

A: I attended Hiram from 1960 to 1964, majored in history, and received a B.A. My PhD is in American Studies from Case Western Reserve University. I taught at Kenyon, Transylvania, Vassar, the University of Seville, and Mount Saint Mary's University. After my retirement as a professor emeritus, I was the Libman Professor of Humanities at Hood College for a year.

Q: What was your time like at Hiram College and what were you involved with as a student on campus?

A: I was a walk-on in four varsity sports: soccer, basketball, track, and tennis, earning eleven varsity letters. I didn't go out for basketball my senior year because I was working on general and history honors papers. I was also very active in Theta Phi Kappa, serving as president my senior year, and I was president pro-tem of the student senate. Due to so many extra-curricular activities, I wasn't as serious a student as I might have been, but I am very grateful to professors Ravitz, Shaw, and McKinley in English, and Norris and Hoffman in history, who inspired me to become a college teacher myself.

Q: What has life looked like for you after you graduated from Hiram? Where has your education taken you?

A: I first became a writer as a young instructor at Kenyon College in 1967. I went to the 80th birthday party of John Crowe Ransom, the respected poet and editor of *The Kenyon Review*, and met a host of celebrated authors who had attended Kenyon or worked at the review. At Transylvania, in Lexington, Kentucky, I published poems and directed their award-winning literary magazine. At Vassar my literary vocation deepened; I went to the prestigious Bread Loaf Writers Conference in Vermont where I met major authors and received encouragement for my work. The best of these poems are collected in *The Walking Man*. Being a poet, however, does not make for a smooth road to tenure. My next job was as a Fulbright Professor at the University of Seville, where for two years I taught American literature to Spanish English majors and completed a draft of my first novel, *Devil Dancer*. It was in Spain that I met my wife Roser Caminals, who subsequently became a prize-winning Catalan novelist. For the next forty years we lived in Frederick, Maryland, where Roser taught Spanish literature at Hood College and I taught American literature and creative writing at Mount Saint Mary's University and published an award-winning novel, *The Children Bob Moses Led*. Following my retirement in 2007 I devoted my full attention to writing, publishing two novels, an award-winning work of history, *William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest*, and scholarly essays. In 2017 I returned to

my first love, poetry, and have since published two books, *Steel Valley Elegy* and *Going Places*, and some two-hundred poems. The Hiram College Lifetime Achievement Award is an honor I consider the capstone of my career.

Q: How has your education at Hiram helped you to where you stand today?

A: I grew up in Poland, Ohio, a small town outside Youngstown; I selected Hiram because it was close, I wanted to play varsity sports, a friend was a student there, and I thought I would feel comfortable at a small liberal arts college. It turned out to be a very wise choice by a rather impulsive high school senior. I found it easy to make friends at Hiram, I was able to participate in various activities, my professors interested me in the life of the mind, and all these things gave me the confidence to believe I could become a college teacher and a writer. Some of those college friendships have survived: I have been playing tennis for sixty years with my Hiram teammate Marshall Dunn, and I am frequently on Facebook with another teammate Dan Dyer; Jim Vincent and I frequently share lively phone conversations. I'm occasionally in touch with my college roommates Jim Lewis and Claude Steele, and I greatly miss the late Gary Marks, my roommate for two years. In sum, lasting friendships, intellectual stimulus, and the confidence to succeed.

Q: Are you in any professional or voluntary roles?

A: At my over-fifty community Heritage Harbour in Annapolis, my wife and I do attend dances, concerts, picnics, and so forth when we can, and give to charitable causes. I no longer go door to door, but come election years I donate to the Democratic candidates of my choice. I might add that I came to Hiram as a young Republican (who once tore down my neighbor's Taft sign and put up an "I Like Ike" sign) but my American history classes with Professor Norris soon disabused me of that. It greatly saddens me to see Ohio vote for that ultimate narcissist, whose idea of a world view is gazing at a full-length mirror, Donald Trump.

William Heath has published three poetry books: *The Walking Man*, *Steel Valley Elegy*, and *Gong Places*; a chapbook, *Night Moves in Ohio*; three novels: *The Children Bob Moses Led* (winner of the Hackney Award), *Devil Dancer*, and *Blacksnake's Path*; a work of history, *William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest* (winner of two Spur Awards and the Oliver Hazard Perry Award), and a collection of interviews, *Conversations with Robert Stone*. He lives in Annapolis. www.williamheathbooks.com