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The Yearly Journal of the Chester River Association • Vol. 21 • 2011



Life on the Chester

with MEREDITH DAVIES HADAWAY

By Ellen Uzelac

It all started with a 13-foot aluminum runabout with a 35-horsepower motor called No Boys Allowed.

"That's when my life began," says poet Meredith Davies Hadaway. "It really coincided with getting out on the water. It was empowering. It was revelatory. I began to write poems. It was a huge imaginative surge for me."

Hadaway has contributed to many poetry journals and written two critically acclaimed collections of poetry since she first took No Boys Allowed out in 1988. Then, as now, the Chester River figures prominently in much of her work.

In the poem *Pumping the Bilge*, she describes "the deep gurgle, like the river clearing its throat." In *Rupture*, she asks: "How much farther, we wonder, in our lifetime, will these two shorelines drift apart?" And in *Why the River*, which began as a prayer, Hadaway affirms "because it is a body / because it bears our weight."

Poet Peter Champion, writing about Hadaway's new book, "The River Is A Reason," notes: "Like the river that runs through the heart of it, the whole collection gathers itself into a single, sinuous body. American poetry is richer for this river."

"How could I possibly have lived here all this time and never found the river other than looking at it from the land, which is really different?"

Hadaway, vice president of college relations and marketing at Washington College, lives on the Chester. She reads poetry every morning in her home office loft to "feed her head" and to look for "prompts" in the poems of others. Her poem *Interval*, about her father teaching her to play piano, was inspired by the very formal skeletal structure of a poem about a rescued dog. "It forces you to do things in a completely different way than you would otherwise do it," she says. "Why? Because it takes you someplace fresh."

Emotional power

Every Hadaway poem starts in a blue spiral notebook. It's where the emotional power resides—on the written page. Then she moves to the computer, an important step in creating the poem's visual voice. Line breaks provide a beat, a rhythm. And titles, hugely important, provide critical information or a way into a poem. "Music and poetry are first cousins," Hadaway says, "The power of poetry is how it looks on the page."

When she was little, Hadaway's mother would read aloud "The Highwayman" and other narrative ballads that sparked Hadaway's imagination. Her father, a naval aviator who in 1946 broke the world's then non-stop flight record, taught her piano at age three. Hadaway, who today plays piano, harp and concertina, says her literary and musical traditions intersect nicely in poetry.

"The River Is A Reason" is dedicated to her late father, Thomas Daniel Davies, who lived at the corners of her pages as she wrote. In *My Father Brings Jacques Cousteau Home for Dinner*, Hadaway recalls the real visit. In *Refraction*: "He tried to tell me about lights and navigation, though I never understood *red right returning*— / because for it to work, you have to know if you're coming or going." And in *Doubts About My Father*, she writes, "I knew he was the real thing—a god without a heaven, only a house, gathering shade and shadow, each room reverberating like the soundboard of an old piano."

Emerging themes

"I constantly write without really worrying about where it's taking me," Hadaway says. "Eventually, certain themes seem to just emerge on their own. In this particular book, clearly it's about the passage of time, water and navigation. They seem to keep finding each other in my work. I can't contemplate anything to do with water, navigation or celestial events without thinking about my father. All these things he was intimately involved with in life, and he instilled an awareness and appreciation of them in mine."

Hadaway, who tries to write a poem each week, came to Chestertown for a weekend in 1976 and never left. She packed in a job at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and worked here as a social services employee, substitute teacher, sign painter and production and marketing manager for a maritime publisher. She joined Washington College as a graphics designer in 1983.



Meredith Davies Hadaway on her dock on the Chester River.

In 1988, the same year she bought *No Boys Allowed*, Hadaway purchased a small house on the river near the Chester River Bridge. She'd spend hours at a time on the water wondering: "How could I possibly have lived here all this time and never found the river other than looking at it from the land, which is really different?" By trial and error, she learned to navigate the Chester.

"I did everything," she says. "I picked crab pots up in my motor. I poured Coke on my battery when it went dead. Who knew until you get stuck somewhere and it doesn't start that Coke works? I learned all about the tides. To this day, I always have an awareness of the tides."

Hadaway also met her husband Cawood on the river.

"It was all about a mutual love of the river. The whole journey I took felt to me like a natural extension of the water. It was part of our courtship, our married life together, part of his illness." Cawood Hadaway, an artist, teacher and outdoorsman, died of cancer in 2000. "Fishing Secrets of the Dead," Hadaway's debut collection, recounts their time together—and apart. Here is one of those poems:

NIGHT LIGHT

Now that you are gone
I leave the bathroom light on
to make some difference
between darkness
and darkness.

The requirements of this poet's work: solitude, slowness and silence.

"I think an inevitable consequence of grief in your life is an awareness you are missing things. The only way to capture them is to commit yourself to slowing down time. To me, that is solitude, poetry and staring out the window," Hadaway says. "I'm a big fan of staring out the window."

At the moment, Hadaway is working on several collections of poems—some "witty," as she says, others about her forebear, a white man from Georgia who loved and had children with an African American woman born into slavery. "So many pieces of their story are missing," notes Hadaway. "Poetry helps you fill those gaps." The Maryland State Arts Council recently awarded Hadaway a grant that she will use to research the Georgia poems.

While her new work has drifted some from the Chester, this is a river that will always tug at her. "I love to go out on the river and just be. It's my favorite thing." While she now travels the river on a 21-foot cocktail cruiser, she will always owe a debt to that 13-foot runabout that helped her find her voice.

"There is something to this day about being alone on a boat that is a wonderful thing. I used to take the 13 to the east fork of Langford, and coming back I'd look for buoys and the little landmarks that would lead me home," Hadaway says. "It made me feel I could do or be anything."



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Why the River

because it is a body

because it rises in our sweat,
marries our breath to the cold

because it spills light back to us
and hoards our shadows

because it leaves when gravity insists
but always comes back

because it traps the clouds so we can sail
across both heaven and earth

because it carries our tears, swells
with our salt

because it is a body

because it bears our weight

Meredith Davies Hadaway