

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

Pour Decisions by Christopher Reilly

Interview by Doug Holder

Recently, I caught up with Christopher Reilly about his new book of poetry "Pour Decisions" Reilly writes: "Whether you come for the poems, the drinks, or the stories, this is a celebration of bars as civic spaces and bartenders as witnesses to contemporary life." I think I will hoist one for this fine collection.

Did you work as bartender for any length of time?

Over thirty years off and on as an adult, but I also grew up in a dive bar on Grand Street in Worcester. I've worked in just about every bartending experience imaginable, from corporate to backyard barbecues, hotel and restaurants of every size and description. I was also Back of the House working in kitchens. I've supplemented my income in the Hospitality industry pretty much all of my life.

I always found bars as a great source of material to write about. They can be sort of dark cathedrals that house the 3AM of the soul. Your take?

Humans are social creatures, we gather and collect, share mutual pastimes, engage in group recreation. Bars, taverns, and pubs are where we go to "belong." This is addressed a couple of times in the book, "Where We Gather," and "At the Corner of Local and Familiar." Bars are a civic and social requirement, in one form or another.

You write in one poem of a "great conspiracy" among denizens of a bar. They are sort of diplomats with treatises, secret agendas, etc.. Explain

It is kind of a dive bar thing, where you have regulars. Really regular, almost daily. Folks with a long shared history have remembered slights, alliances of convenience, mutually agreed upon "no-fly" zones. You might be expected to move over one seat because Charlie is coming in, and he always sits there. Or never play that song on the juke because it makes Barney crazy sad. Or don't mess with Darlene if she comes in with her hair up.

Large or small, shared history binds folks together, makes them feel part of the fabric of their place. Every bar worthy of the name has its own lore, stories, and even legends.

In the poem "In the Glass Between" you put a microscope into the process of a man getting drunk, and his Jekyll and Hyde personality. In the end, the booze turns into a monster that consumes him. But at first it is described turning up, "the dimmer switch of the soul." Too bad he couldn't stop at the first drink. Your take....

Well, like I say in the Notes for that poem, it is the bartender's job to not let that happen, but the only way to be good at not letting it happen is to have it happen to you a couple times. Hey, people forget to eat, or are



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super stressed, or whatever, it can get away from you. But I would instead refer you to the poem "The Sweet Pull." Sometimes it really is an addiction.

I always felt the bar scene in the "Shining" was probably the greatest one in modern cinema. Of course there is Billy Joel's "Piano Man." Bukowski wrote a lot of drinking and bar poems. Did these guys inspire you?

Well, Bukowski is the reason I got into poetry in the first place. Growing up, I had a blue collar guy's understanding of poetry. But then I found Bukowski, and I realized the poem doesn't have to be just one type of thing, it could be whatever the writer wanted. Changed my perception of poetry altogether.

But the great thing about bars is the variety. Both of those you mentioned, as well as Cheers, or Archie's Place, or brass and fern yuppie bars, or Chinese restaurants, etc.

Two of my favorite bars are gone, the "Wursthaus" in Harvard Square, and "Jake Wirth's" in Boston. What bars did you haunt, and did they work their way into the collection?

I'm not really a big drinker. I prefer the craft of mixology. I worked at so many different bars, I was not a frequent visitor. Most of these poems I actually wrote standing behind the bar. I spent hours in that environment, and I was usually leaving with a pocket full of cash, so I learned long ago I was better off getting in my car and going home.

That being said, I was a huge fan of the long-gone Gilrein's, a blues bar on Main Street, and I'm still a big fan of the still ever-eclectic Ralph's Chadwick Square Diner, which is stuck on the side of a warehouse converted to a terrific music venue, and they have great burgers, as well as a weekly poetry open mic.

Did you ever have a drinking problem?

Thankfully, no. My old man did, and he was nothing if not a great example of a bad example.

Why should we read this book?

Pour Decisions is a book about work — the kind that happens late, quietly, and in public — written by someone who actually did the job. It doesn't romanticize bar life or turn it into spectacle. It listens. These poems treat bars as civic spaces and bartenders as witnesses to contemporary American life. If you care about labor, voice, or how people really talk when the night gets thin, this book belongs on your shelf.

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WHERE WE GATHER

We meet in the middle,
between the jukebox and the door,
between the clink of glasses and the spill of laughter.

This is where stories loosen their collars,
where strangers lean closer,
where love wears no crown, but sits,
cross-legged, at a sticky table.

Taverns are cathedrals without pews—
here we pray into stained glasses of another kind,
confess in slurred whispers,
forgive with a touch on the shoulder.

Here, you can break and no one will sweep you away.
Here, you can build again
with borrowed hope and the last of your change.

In these walls,
we are not titles, not troubles, not ticking clocks—
we are the shared breath of a song half-remembered,
the arm around your back when you didn't ask.

Love in a bar is not always forever,
but it is real in the moment—
and sometimes,
a moment is what saves us.