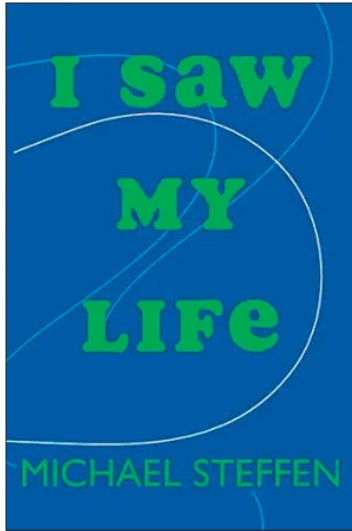
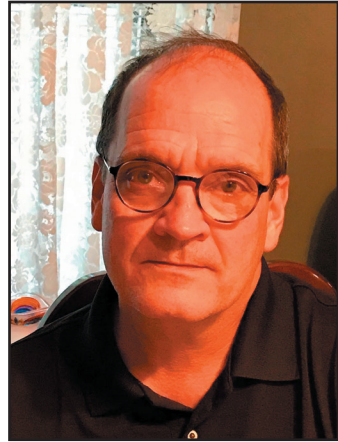


Poet Michael T. Steffen sees his own life flash before his eyes.

Interview with Doug Holder

I had the privilege of interviewing the accomplished poet and respected Boston/Cambridge/Somerville literary figure, Michael T. Steffen. Steffen has a new collection out titled, "I Saw My Life." His publisher (Lily Poetry Review Press) writes of this collection:

"From the saying I saw my life flash before my eyes, the book's title announces thresholds, things and moments of arrest and luminosity, resplendent, but also shocking as a near-death experience might be, and fleeting as any flash may be. The stars in their constellations at night glimpsed up through leaves of a tree, the drama of a scull tipped in a powerful mid-river current, a woven shopping handbag, such objects in their places and handling evoke the weights and sensations revisiting the body in reflective memory, at the heart of poetry's deeply personal yet widely shared and recognized expressions."



In the "Bell Jar" Sylvia Plath writes, "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked." Your book is titled "I Saw My Life," how would you respond to Plath's quote in the context of your own collection?

The title for my new book comes more generally from the saying "I saw my life flash before my eyes." The narrator utters that at one point in the poem, about the heart attack he has suffered. At other points in the poem the meditation shifts to a different meaning of a near death experience and comes to the consolation that all of life is lived near death. That is what being mortal means. On a lighter level, the poem wanders with a father in the wake of his

daughter's leaving for college, and she plays the little twist on her parents of paying an unannounced visit home that weekend. The narrator and his wife are also preparing to leave the apartment they've lived in since the girl was very young. So it's a coming-to-middle-age scenario, revisiting a world that is slipping through my fingers. You with your current huge life move from Somerville out to Revere might sympathize a good deal. The Sylvia Plath quote is pertinent, I do really admire her poetry. Figuratively, when she talks about the ramifying fig branch, I think it speaks to the method of my writing, how the meditation of the sections of the long poem proceed to constellate and affirm the vital diversity of correspondences in the weft of the author's love, his life, his relationships as

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wells as his orientation in his home town. There is a narrative movement, in the poem, from crisis to acceptance, that I'd like to underscore here, in my belief that the "narrative" speaking voice and all that unfolds from a sequence of events in a narrative poem or short story or novel provide a rich source of feeling and personal revelation. I think that element has been underplayed or shoved to the back of the Modern long poem, in our preferences intellectual confidence in Cubism or Dada, the simultaneity of all time—an expression from Joyce—in post-Modern times.

In your poem "Atlases" it seems you feel like Atlas to a Zeus-like father. From speaking to you over the years it seems you and your father have very different sensibilities. In most father/son relationships there is a love/hate component. Your take?

There is no hate in my relationship with my father. As a well-provided for son in every material and educational respect, there was a petty filial want to blame him for everything in my life that turned south. But I'm way over that now. We enjoy talking about sports, he was a true athlete, a good football player through college, a Golden Gloves Midwest welter-weight champion in boxing, and on the U.S. Army boxing team in Germany, then had a short semi-pro boxing career before the boss (my mother) made him hang up his gloves and stick to his job as a salesman in residential and then industrial glass. The poem "Atlases" evokes his keen interest in Atlas maps, of the United States for when he and my mother began traveling, long before the Internet and GPS, and then abroad. They were large floppy bound print maps that spread easily over a living room coffee table. When I left for England to do my Masters degree, he started collecting maps of Great Britain and then Europe, when I moved to France, as a way I guess of orienting himself in some geographical way to where I was living. I used to think my undertaking in poetry yoked me to an immense disciplinary burden, but now I see it more as any long-term commitment, a relationship, a career, kids, home. The Greek myths often were both poignant and widely relevant. We all might feel like we've been condemned to hold up the weight of the world.

We are often told not to assume the speaker of a poem is the poet itself. At this stage in time did you feel the need to cover the waterfront of your life, so to speak?

It's the poem of my young life's most intense losses. I worked on it for a long time and it underwent many mutations. In its original form, the manuscript reached over 200 pages. David Ferry read one of those Ur-texts for me and we talked extensively over the next few years about it. There really could have been nobody but David Ferry to dedicate this collection to. I miss his generous attention. I miss him. Finally, I decided today's readership might feel stretched with such a grand presentation all in one cover, and the original text splintered into three separate long poems. At the end of the long poem in this book, allusions are made to an uncle of mine and his participation in the D-Day battle at Normandy. I did go on from England to teach in Normandy and then closer to Paris for a good ten years before returning to the States to write. At this point I just feel a deep gratitude to Eileen Cleary and Michael McInnis at Lily Poetry Review Press for publishing this book. It helps me think the other two longer poems—which are more in the way of historical narratives—may

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attract interest and notice and that one day — the long vision of my journey in poetry — will see the publication of the trilogy.

What do you hope is the cumulative effect of this book on a prospective reader?

My simple hope is that readers will enjoy the language and the moments of the poem, maybe appreciate the dilemmas the writer finds himself struggling with. Poetry and literature have helped me feel less alone on the journey of my life. I'm prone to inwardness and solitude. Books and the voices I find in them keep the interior conversation lively and relevant. They help me belong.

from *I Saw My Life*, section 26

*The men arrived and took the furniture
out of the living room, leaving the space
an emptiness of eggshell,
of abandoned
walls with their reach up to the lofty ceiling.
They'd taped up curtains of translucent plastic,
themselves becoming shadows with the tools
that tapped and scraped. A power sander whined.
A powder of old surfaces was kept
from the adjacent kitchen as it fell
and drifted onto the plastic, onto the paper
taped on the hardwood floors as I imagined
a soul being emptied of its residues —*