

Informational Interview with Robert Long Foreman

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I got a chance to talk with Robert Long Foreman, who received his PhD in English in 2012, specializing in creative nonfiction. I met Rob when he taught the nonfiction workshop in 2018 at Mizzou. What's unique about Rob's experience is that he started out on the tenure track after grad school and was a professor for a few years before leaving and taking on a freelance writing career. He currently works as a ghostwriter in Kansas City, Missouri. Here's our conversation.

Lacey Rowland: What are the advantages and disadvantages of your current job?

Robert Long Foreman: Well, the disadvantage is that there's no job security. I don't know if I'm going to have a job next week, I don't know if the people that hired me are going to have work for me. But I can work my own hours, I can work around my kids. I'm home with my kids right now [during the pandemic]. This job is a continual education in writing. It's a lot like teaching, in that I'm working with folks one-on-one to teach them writing. But instead of looking at a single chapter, or a single story, I'm looking at entire books. As a ghostwriter, I'm writing books that I never would have thought I'd ever write. It makes you write in a different way that hopefully informs the way that you write for yourself and teaches you something. Like trying to sing a note higher than you would normally sing; you might not sound the way you'd want to sound in your own work, but you can surprise yourself by what you come up with. And at least you're pushing yourself to try it.

LR: Would you say that your time is more flexible than when you were an academic?

RLF: Oh yeah, much more. In large part, I never felt that my schedule was that flexible as an academic. I was having to advise students, which could really only happen during the daytime because that was when the building was open. I was teaching during the day, and teaching a lot. So really, I was working a 9-5 job. And when I got home, I was helping take care of the kids, so I didn't have much time to write for myself or work. My hours now are much more flexible, especially in terms of writing for myself. At least, when the world isn't falling apart. The kids are in school, and so I have a little time during the day between my work to write my own stuff.

LR: What factors influenced your choice between nonacademic work and TTT, not waiting on the market and adjuncting?

RLF: It's funny because I still do a little adjuncting. I taught your class in the fall. But I haven't done the thing where I adjunct a ton and continue looking for a full-time teaching job. It's in part because after I left my full-time teaching job, I realized that teaching wasn't actually that good for me. Teaching continually kept me on this treadmill that kept me ignorant of a lot of problems in my life. It wasn't necessarily good for my mental health to be doing as much teaching as I was doing.

Part of the reason that I don't adjunct a lot is because I have this other source of income. And it came about because I knew this person from grad school who was a higher-up in a ghostwriting company. But you don't have to go that route, you can do it on your own as a freelancer.

Ghostwriting doesn't negatively affect my own work like I thought it would. I was worried about that, but I realized that helping other people's writing get better doesn't interfere with making my own writing better. Teaching is more hazardous to my writing. After I teach, I'm depleted. I can't do anything for the rest of the day. I won't be able to write unless I sleep for a couple hours or something. Teaching a one-off class, there's a certain freedom. I get to teach what I love, but I don't have to do the administrative stuff that goes along with it.

I mean, you could understand this since you were a "regular person" once, but your sense of time changes when you're not on an academic schedule. The class I taught at Mizzou seems like so long ago, but it really wasn't.

LR: I don't know if I've ever been a "regular person."

RLF: *Laughs*. Well, when you weren't in school.

LR: What do you miss about academia? What were you totally pumped to leave behind?

RLF: For as much as I talk about how draining teaching was, and how bad it was for my writing, there are times that I miss it. I looked forward to seeing others' work. I got to be surprised in a really

pleasant way. And the joy of leaving a classroom knowing you had a really great conversation, that people really got something out of it. That feeling's really hard to come by outside of teaching.

The things I miss, it's funny, I didn't mind advising students, I actually kind of liked it and was good at it. And students often requested me as an advisor because I actually talked to them and didn't think of them as some sort of burden.

The things I don't miss is the culture of tenure-track professors. There was nothing wrong with the people I worked with—they were great—but I never felt like I belonged in their crowd. When they had a department social event, I would end up in a corner with the adjuncts.

On the one hand, I get it. I'm from West Virginia, I was teaching in New England. Early on I heard what they thought about where I was from.

LR: If you could go back and give yourself any advice as a grad student what would you tell yourself?

RLF: I understood it intellectually, but I wish I understood that getting a job as a professor is just one option you have with a PhD. Just because it's a professor job doesn't mean you need to jump at the chance to take the job. There are a lot of shitty jobs out there. I wish I understood as a PhD student that the job as a professor is just a job. Your job is not what makes you whole, it's not what makes you a person. I fell into the trap of letting that be my identity. Being a professor is as much an identity as any other profession, and it can trick you into working for terrible pay, or doing a lot of unpaid labor. People talk about the prestige of being a professor, and I just never felt that at all. I would try and remind myself every day to resist the mystique of professor-hood.

I'm not saying that getting a PhD is bad—it's worth it, stay with it. You learn a lot from it. But you don't have to limit yourself to just one profession.