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### **Interview with Derald Hamilton, author of *Twice Upon a Prequel... & Three Shorts***

**PBR:** Why two prequels? Why not link them together rather than separately? It would have been interesting to contrast the two given their ages and beliefs.

**Hamilton:** Both stories were originally a part of my novel *The Call*. Then, during the editing process, one of my editors, Michelle Pollace, suggested that I revise them and make them separate works. And now that I've done so, I'm rather pleased with the results. These are two of the supporting characters in my novel that I deemed substantial enough to warrant their own stories. As for contrasting the two, I never considered that as an option. Elmo's story comprises his entire life up to his entry into Parkins. With Reginald, we are only covering the summer before his entry into the seminary.

**PBR:** Why a seminary specifically set in Oklahoma? What fascinates you about that region?

**Hamilton:** It's not a matter of it holding any fascination, just familiarity. The seminary I went to was in Oklahoma. Oklahoma is one of the states situated in what is termed as "The Bible Belt." It's one of the areas of the country I've become very familiar with and because I have familiarity with the area, I felt confident that I could lend an air of authenticity in my telling of the story.

When I was growing up in a military family, we moved around quite a bit and apart from a tour of Fort Dix, New Jersey and Kaiserslautern, Germany, many of my father's assignments were in the South. And one thing you learn as a child living in the South is that you go to church. You also address your elders as Ma'am and Sir. It's also an area where, during the sixties and seventies I discovered that corporal punishment in the schools was practiced very freely. It was considered a way of introducing the children to "fear of the Lord." While there I learned that God was a paddle made of birch wood and I use to pray quite fervently not to be on its receiving end. And avoiding the sting of that paddle was a lot like walking a tightrope.

Not having lived in the South for the past thirty some years, I may be writing about a bygone era. But having followed the primaries, I managed to gain the impression that Oklahoma still remains what can be termed as a "red" state, and perhaps among the more conservative of the "red" states. And usually among the "red" states evangelical Christianity generally thrives. Of course evangelical Christianity is only one form of Christianity, just as the seminary atmosphere I portray has more than one form of student. Elmo Piggins is a product and representative of the more extreme right end, and Reginald Dexter, being Unitarian, is more the extreme left. And, as I was to discover during my four years in seminary, Oklahoma harbors both extremes.

**PBR:** A number of the characters seem to have military backgrounds in *The Call* and *Prequels*. Any particular reason for that?

**Hamilton:** “Taken Up Before The General,” although couched in fiction, could very well be considered an autobiographical snap shot. It’s based on an incident that happened to me back when we were stationed in Kaiserslautern, Germany. And what happened is typical of a military setting. You’re considered guilty until proven innocent. And you don’t admit an error, even when you’re proven wrong. Apologizing is taboo. Fighting among the youth is considered a rite of passage. And above everything else you’d better salute that @#\$\$% flag.

As for “The War Comes Home,” I based the character of Laura Porter mostly upon my Mom, although she could be a composite of a number of military wives I’ve known during my life. However, most of those wives were the ones raised back in the day when you were taught that a wife is to be submissive, and perhaps subservient to her husband. This usually meant that as one who was saddled with a military husband, she had the definite role of buffer between her husband and her children – the peacekeeper as it were.

Fellow military brat Mary Edward Wersch in her book, “Military Brats” cites, in many instances, the military wife as the husband’s appeaser. She also serves as the family historian and often times any revision of what actually happens is brought about solely by her professed recollections. For instance, in the Pat Conroy novel, “The Great Santini,” young Ben Meachum is seen confronting his mother over a beating she received when her husband was in the throes of a drunken rage. She denied remembering the incident until Ben showed her the garment she was wearing at the time and the blood stains that would not wash out. Pat Conroy goes even further with this form of maternal portrayal in his novel “The Prince of Tides.” In this novel the mother is portrayed as imposing enforced denial on both herself and her children when anything bad happened. A good example of this dynamic is illustrated during the rape sequence when the mother, the protagonist (a boy), and his younger sister are raped by local ruffians. The ruffians are eventually confronted and killed by the older brother, but after the incident, her mother instructs the children to forget about this incident—IT NEVER HAPPENED! But it did happen, and during the course of this enforced denial, tragic circumstance occurred. But, too often that’s the lot of the military wife—at least during that generation. As my mother often put it, “We were taught that once you make your bed you lie in it.” And their parents must have taught them well. Of course I don’t know if this trend still exists.

I remember back during the sixties I had a cousin who married a military man, and she filed for a divorce while he was doing a tour of Vietnam. Also, I heard that Pat Conroy’s mother eventually filed for divorce and used her son’s novel “The Great Santini” as grounds for it. Also, there was a film made recently entitled “The General’s Daughter.” In this film it is the daughter who follows in her father’s footsteps and is among the first of the female cadets to enter West Point. While she is attending West Point and out on military maneuvers, she is gang raped multiple times by her fellow male cadets. While in the hospital she is instructed by her father the General to forget the incident ever happened...but she can’t forget. And it’s this suppressed memory that leads to her undoing.

As for Laura Porter, my beleaguered protagonist, I conclude right before her confrontation with the actual crisis. And there most likely will be a crisis. After all, military men often times want their children to be like them, and Laura’s husband is about to find out that his son, a supposed all-American sports enthusiast is now a ballerina, and his sweet sixteen and never been

kissed daughter is now nineteen, living in sin with her boyfriend, and protesting the war he's been fighting. Also, throughout the story, you can sense that Laura, the consummate giver and appeaser, is beginning to buckle under the strain. It's kind of reminiscent of the Emmy Lou Harris song, "To Daddy."

In *The Call* I tended it more as a commentary on institutionalism, contrasting their likenesses. I've often found it amazing how God is always dragged into the picture for the sake of justification. So for me, the running of both church and the armed forces tended to write their own satire.

**PBR:** How do you think that *The Call* would fare in other media?

**Hamilton:** I've been told by a few people who have read it that it might make a good movie. So, if it might do well in movies, I would think it could do well as a television series, although I do harbor certain reservations about the notion. *The Paper Chase*, a series about law school only lasted for one season. Also I remember back in the fifties there was this television series called *Crossroads*. This series dealt with problems and conflicts faced by clergymen. The series was a success. Of course in light of the fact that the fifties was considered the "buttoned down" generation, and given the material in *The Call* I could see that varying modifications would need to be made. Also, I believe there was another television series pertaining to the Catholic Church that was on the air briefly during the nineties that my church advised us not to watch because of the salacious and irreverent content. I believe *The Call* might be subject to a similar fate. Even though I base my novel on the surroundings and interactions I heard and experienced during the time I was in seminary, certain revelations might best be kept under wraps. Already an elder in my church has read my novel, and he said he was "saddened" by it, especially the scene where one seminarian forcibly took another seminarian's cot during a retreat. So, I'm more optimistic about its success in the cinema than I am about trying as a vehicle for a television series.

**PBR:** Are there any plans to a sequel of *The Call*? Or more novellas?

**Hamilton:** No. I do have plans in the offing for another novel, but it's on a totally unrelated topic.

**PBR:** Elmo is an interesting character, and one of the supporting characters in the book. Any particular reason you chose him out of the characters you could have chosen?

**Hamilton:** I based the character on a few people I knew while I was in seminary. And there was one in particular who held similar attributes and background. And I'm not going to say anymore at this juncture. I don't want to get sued. So, I'll simply reiterate my disclaimer that my story is fiction and any similarities to any people living or dead is purely coincidental. If it worked for the guy who wrote "The Greek Tycoon," it ought to work for me. But like the Sinclair Lewis character, I kept waiting for this guy to get him comeuppance. And like the derisive Elmer Gantry, he never did, at least as far as I could tell.

**PBR:** As a child of the 70's there are certain aspects of his background that ring familiar. Did you attempt to make his story a statement of the times?

**Hamilton:** Most of Elmo's story took place in the seventies. But yes, although I'm more inclined to believe the statements found in this novella are not necessarily exclusive to this present era. Sinclair Lewis' "Elmer Gantry" makes a similar statement, and I believe the backdrop of that story was the twenties and thirties. So there are some features that remain

timeless. For instance, I believe it was back in the late nineteenth century, a venerable showman by the name of P.T. Barnum was quoted as saying, “There’s a sucker born every minute.” And given the current political scene here in America and the incidents that are highlighted in the news, I’m lead to conclude that there is a large part of the American psyche that enjoys being conned. And deep down, although he projects a strong aura of sincerity and conviction at the conclusion of the novella, I think young Elmo knows he is someone on the giving end of that dynamic.

**PBR:** Is Reginald in it strictly for the meditative purposes, or has he received an actual call of his own?

**Hamilton:** Probably neither. Reginald is still a healthy and hardy individual whose chronological age is working against him from a societal standpoint. He would have probably been content to continue teaching Psychology for another twenty years, but university policy dictates he must retire. Consequently, he’s now looking for other things to do to fill up his time, to give the rest of his life purpose and meaning, and to rise above the dictates of societal restrictions. I find his story particularly telling at this time in my life. I’m presently retired, and from what I’ve been told, the average length of time I may have left would tally around six thousand days. It’s how I choose to spend this time that will dictate my longevity. It’s been said that upon retiring, sound personal hygiene recommends that you have at least five hobbies you are passionate about to assure your continuance. I presently have two well established hobbies and am looking at a third. So I’m inclined to look to Reginald Dexter as a model, and like Reginald, I choose not to, in the words of Dylan Thomas, “Go gentle into that good night.”

**PBR:** Eleanor is an interesting study of a woman with her own life. Will we be seeing more of her?

**Hamilton:** I really haven’t considered any further plans for Eleanor. I have another book in the planning stages, but my plans entail an entirely new cast of characters. Of course I do intend on trying to continue to create strong female characters. And painful as it may be, I will continue to examine the world from their perspective. As Dustin Hoffman was quoted as saying near the end of his movie *Tootsie*, “I was more a man as a woman than I’d ever been as a man.” Of course even though the movie was a comedy, that quote carried for me very deep and moving insight as to the structure of our human psyche. And this insight is not something we men often feel comfortable availing ourselves.

**PBR:** What Reginald is doing seems almost a rite of passage. Is he finally becoming a man, even if it is late in life?

**Hamilton:** I rather believe he’s trying to keep from growing old before he feels it’s his time to grow old. There are many instances when old age is something that is socially imposed, but taken on a person by person basis it’s highly subjective as to when old age really begins. I mean look at George Burns. He was still going strong at ninety. He outlived his wife by nearly fifty years and, based on what I read on the man, he was still sexually active right up to the last. At first I didn’t know whether or not it would be credible to have a 65 year old man sky dive for the first time. So, at age 56 I tried it and yes, it can be done. However, I made Reginald more a man than me, because I’ll probably never try it again. I mean, even though I was strapped with an instructor, I still found it to be scary as hell.

**PBR:** Is there a particular model for Dr. Green?

**Hamilton:** No. But somebody had to be a guide for Reginald's "Rite of Passage."

**PBR:** "Taken Up Before the General" and "The War Comes Home" are interesting character studies. Were they linked at any point, or were they completely stand-alone?

**Hamilton:** They were completely stand alone pieces. One examines matters from the perspective of a child/adolescent having to contend with the rules, restrictions, and expectations placed upon him in the "fortress" setting. The other examines what I found to be the all-too-common plight of the military wife. And to this I'd like to add that writing "The War Comes Home" I found to be a rather painful exercise in that I had to place myself in the female mind-set. And that's a hard thing for a man to do. A woman can place herself in the mind-set of a man far more easily than a man can place himself into a female mind-set. We men often put up our defenses with such statements as "There ain't no way to understand a woman." The problem is we don't dare try to understand the female point of view, because for us to do so would mean to call our own masculine identity into question, and force ourselves to reevaluate our own male mind-set.

For instance, when I was still a child I observed that the male species rarely, if ever, admitted they were wrong. Offering up an apology was considered a sign of weakness. And above all else, men were not supposed to cry. It was considered manly to be able to hold your liquor, puff on that cigar, cuss, and take charge. Even today I see this trend being played out. I remember finding this one piece of the internet entitled "I'm A Bad American" and one line in it said "I'm not in touch with my feelings and I like it that way." So, even getting an ulcer is considered to be somewhat macho. But for us to get into a woman's mind-set might mean having to look at ourselves in a different light, to reevaluate our preconceived notions of what comprises manhood, to bring to the forefront the forbidden attributes of tenderness and compassion and other sissy stuff. But mostly, we'd be forced to conclude that we're not all that hot and that we may be our own worst enemies continually touting about our masculine facade. After all, we need them far more than they need us. And that's a terrible pill for a "real man" to swallow. So, in my having written this story, I believe I may have charted into forbidden territory.

"The War Comes Home" is the third story I've tried to write from a female perspective, and I have to say, in all honesty, it doesn't get any easier. The first time I contemplated doing this was after attending a seminar at a place called "The Writer's Connection." The topic of that seminar was entitled, "Writing the Romance Novel." A few of the speakers had been successfully published authors of Harlequin Temptations and Silhouette Desire. Their writing was labeled as eroticism from a female perspective. I left this seminar early concluding that I could never write something like that. But then, after doing a bit of soul searching I chanced upon the notion that even if female eroticism was an issue that I didn't feel comfortable addressing, there were other aspects of the female mindset that might be worth exploring. And who knows? Maybe it might make me better equipped as a potential marriage partner if I ever chose to embark upon that venture a second time. Of course, so far I haven't quite been that brave.

**PBR:** Any particular inspiration for "Little Bit of Wisdom"?

**Hamilton:** Nothing in particular. I was riding in the bus one day and saw a piece of paper blowing by. The writer in me just took hold. And based on the feedback I've received thus far, it must have done a pretty decent job of doing so.

# Interview with Derald W. Hamilton

Twice Upon a Prequel...& Three Shorts

Derald W. Hamilton

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Reviewed by Richard R. Blake for Reader Views (3/12)

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Derald Hamilton, who is here to discuss his new book “Twice Upon a Prequel...& Three Shorts.”

*Derald Hamilton was born in Santa Cruz, California. His father was a career soldier, so being part of a military family, Derald moved around a lot to numerous bases as a child, both in the U.S. and Germany. When health issues took precedence, Derald and his mother settled in a suburb of Sacramento, while his dad continued moving to wherever the Army assigned him.*

*After high school, Derald enrolled in community college, graduated, and transferred to U.C.Davis where he majored in American Studies and became active in the campus Christian program. During the time he was active in that program, he received what he interpreted as a call to the ministry, but upon graduating from U.C. Davis, he found himself without the funding necessary to pursue seminary studies. With no scholastic help available, Derald worked at a few temporary jobs and finally secured a clerical job with the State of California. After saving to continue his studies, he enrolled in Phillips Graduate Theological Seminary to pursue a Master’s of Divinity Degree but became disillusioned with church politics. After earning a Master’s Degree in Library Science, he ended up working for the past twenty-seven years in an administrative support job with the Santa Clara Valley Transit Authority.*

*Along the way he acquired Associates Degrees in Technical Writing, Management and Supervision, Business Administration, Accounting, and Word Processing. Derald continued freelance writing, and at the age of forty, decided he had done enough living to lend credibility to fiction writing. He has since been able to have four of his short stories published, along with non-fiction articles, and, while now sixty-one, has brought his first novel into print, followed by his new short story collection, which he is here to talk about today.*

**Tyler:** Welcome back, Derald. It’s a pleasure to have you as a guest again. Last time you were here we talked about your novel “The Call,” which makes me curious about the title of this new book “Twice Upon a Prequel ...& Three Shorts.” Could we begin by you telling us a little about that title and how this book is connected to the last one?

**Derald:** “Twice Upon A Prequel” in part, features two novellas that focus on two of my more prominent secondary characters in my novel “The Call,” i.e. Elmo Piggins, the prototypical southern preacher’s son who follows in his father’s foot steps and Reginald Dexter, the elder Unitarian seminarian embarking on another career after being forcibly retired from his position as professor of psychology at the University of Oklahoma. While crafting the story line of “The Call,” I meant for these two characters to serve as foils of my hapless protagonist Ishmael O’Donnell. But I didn’t quite feel that I had completed the task until I had given these two

gentlemen a broader base with regards their background. In doing so, their roles that serve as points in contrast to Ishmael O'Donnell demonstrate a greater sense of completeness.

For instance, Elmo Piggins, at the outcome of his story, exhibits a full acceptance of his legacy and embraces it thoroughly with a single-minded sense of devotion and an unquestioning adherence to what it demands of him. These attributes, of course, are not only reinforced by his familial roots, but also receive their basis from supernatural affirmation that allegedly comes from outside himself. You can contrast that with Ishmael O'Donnell who can find no affinity with what is insisted upon by his father to be his legacy and is left with only a vague affirmation of what he considers at one point to be a calling, yet receives no further reinforcement from that point on. You might say he's become like a horse with blinders on, focusing exclusively on what lies ahead, acknowledging no peripheral side views.

Contrasting Ishmael O'Donnell from another angle is Reginald Dexter. He's a professor of psychology at the University of Oklahoma, a position he had held for many years and would have probably been content to hold onto for many years more were it not for the insistence of the powers-that-be that he relinquish his position at 65. Feeling nowhere near ready for retirement, he sets out, with the help of his pastor/mentor/friend Kenneth Green to reinvent himself. Being Unitarian, his odyssey is a bit different from the youthful, more idealistic and dogmatic Elmo. Having lived longer, Reginald is a bit more cynical in attitude. I mean how do you truly define a pessimist than that of an optimist who's been around for a while? His approach to matters of a spiritual nature, too, are far more eclectic than young Elmo's. Throughout the course of this novella Reginald is seen contemplating Zen and eastern mysticism, doing tai chi exercises, and dabbling in other unorthodox matters that purportedly exist outside the realm of traditional Christianity. In fact, in one of the scenes in "The Call," one of Reginald's seminary colleagues rebukes him for such practices and states, "It makes you a can didate for Hell." So, Reginald's approach is seen as far from orthodox, but it does work for him, once again contrasting him with Ishmael whose approach does not.

**Tyler:** What made you decide to reintroduce your characters in this book did you feel you had some loose ends, or just other stories you wanted to tell?

**Derald:** Actually, originally, both of these novellas were part of "The Call." But one of my editors, Michelle Pollace by name, advised me that the novel was too long. And she was right. The first edition of my novel numbered over 1100 pages. Among the item she had me cut were Elmo's and Reginald's stories along with some of my other characters. However, unlike some of my characters that she advised me to delete altogether, she stated that Reginald's and Elmo's stories had a certain autonomous flavor about themselves and might do well standing alone as separate works. So I took Michelle's advice and here you see the finished product. As for the inclusion of the short stories, I got that idea from Phillip Roth in his first novella "Goodbye Columbus."

Within the context of this work, Phillip Roth included, with his novella, around five short pieces of fiction, all of which contained thematic variations on what it meant to be Jewish in contemporary culture. I explored a similar approach in the construct of "Twice Upon a Prequel & Three Shorts," but with little thematic variations. For instance, I gave my readers two novellas. Also, a thematic variation that seems to run consistent in all of these works of fiction rests the notion of the tyrant dictates of institutionalism and the oppressive mind-set it imposes on the individual and his/her spirit and its means of punishing those who do not tow the line.

Reginald Dexter manages for a time to elude the bonds of institutionalism while making his transition and begins to grasp a true taste of freedom during his odyssey of reinvention. Yet, at



the conclusion of his story, the reader is cognizant of the notion that Reginald, for purposes of completing the process he started, although his story ends on an upbeat note, must once again submit to the demands of an institution. And you see this bondage holding fast to all the characters found within the context of this anthology. Elmo Piggins surrenders himself unconditionally to it, Daryl McGregor and Laura Porter will always bear the bruises this leviathan has inflicted upon them, and only Amos Posey in “A Litter Bit Of Wisdom” who, at a time near the end of his life, can grasp a sense of true freedom from this oppressive force while at the same time sensing his link with the Creator and the workings of the infinite.

**Tyler:** Tell us a little about Reginald Dexter and where the story about him takes place—it is a “prequel” to who he is in “The Call,” correct?

**Derald:** Yes. He had to be something or someone before he embarked on his seminary endeavor. And what takes place in his story transpires during the summer prior to his enrolling in seminary. The occupation he has been a part of for the past forty years has cast him out leaving him to flounder about in a directionless void. In the context of his story I cite the words of the poet Dylan Thomas, “Do not go gentle into that good night, but rage, rage against the coming light.” Reginald Dexter may be chronologically at the socially assumed age of retirement, but that does not mean he is ready to retire. But certain restrictions are placed upon him that will not permit him to keep on doing what he has become accustomed to doing for the past forty years. So, he has to figure on doing something else. Thus he begins his process of reinventing, or as the title infers, “rebirthing.” And throughout the novella we see Reginald going through this process with results I have been told have been portrayed as both inspirational and life affirming.

**Tyler:** Will you also tell us a little about Elmo Piggins? Who was he in “The Call” and what makes a prequel story about him enticing for your readers in your opinion?

**Derald:** Elmo serves as one of the foils to my protagonist Ishmael O’Donnell. He is a dyed in wool preacher’s kid and a thoroughly in-grained product of deep Southern culture, firmly rooted and steadfastly assimilated in that tradition with set notions as to where he’s going and how he’s going to get there.

Contrast this to Ishmael O’ Donnell who comes from no place in particular, has never been anywhere long enough to put down any designated roots, has never assimilated himself to any set tradition, and although he may have a stated goal, he’s lacking in his awareness of the right way to achieve the goal. When I was a kid we moved around a lot, and many of the bases we were stationed at were in the South.

As a native Californian I found there to be nothing more conducive to culture shock than life in the South. One feature of life in the South rested with the necessity of church attendance. If you were a child living during the late fifties and early sixties in the South, it was just assumed you would go to church. You would attend Sunday school too. Memorization of Bible verses was strongly encouraged and your Sunday school teacher would call on you to recite those verses before the class to assure your compliance with this expectation. After all, what could be more humiliating than to stand up before your classmates and not know the Bible verse you were called upon to recite?

You would be teased, shamed, and classmates would heap threats of Hell on you, and the teacher, though s/he might make a cursory attempt to call the class to order, would really do nothing to discourage this onslaught of negativity. After all, it was considered better for a child to be shamed into Heaven than affirmed into Hell. Back then nobody really gave a damn about the maintenance of a child’s self-esteem.

As someone who had taken up residency in such a locale, it was considered my obligation to comply to this tradition even though while living in California I rarely, if ever, had anything to do with the church. But as I was later to discover you could, and for the most part, would live like the devil the rest of the week and really not give too much thought to the matter. Life in the South was neatly compartmentalized that way.

I learned of more ways to get into mischief than was ever imagined back in California. And I'd get into more fights as well. Children reach puberty in the South quicker than they do in other regions of the United States, so sexual activity is more prevalent. Of course so were the consequences. You got a girl pregnant, by God you'd marry her. And in some areas of the South people marry at younger ages.

For instance, in certain semi-rural areas it was almost commonplace to see a husband and wife in a twelfth grade, sixth period math class with the wife about eight months along in her pregnancy. And I never believed for one minute that Britney Spears, a native of one of our Southern states who dressed in the manner she did, was a virgin. And my suspicions proved themselves correct having been briefly exposed to an article that stated that she had been sexually active since she was fourteen. Knowing what I knew of certain Southern regions, I'm surprised she waited that long. I ran across a bit of controversy with one of my editors back when I was refining Elmo Piggins' story.

In one scene Elmo's elder sister Lawanda is seen showering and having sex with her boyfriend. In the original draft Lawanda is thirteen and her boyfriend is sixteen. My editor believed Lawanda was too young to be involved in such an activity and although I tried to explain that it was commonplace in the South for kids to begin being sexually active at a younger age, my editor felt it best to move her age up to fifteen. Another aspect of life in the South that I had to contend with was the matter of corporal punishment. Both the principal and the teachers had paddles and they used them quite liberally.

I remember many occasions where a classmate would be caught chewing gum or have candy in their mouth, and if the teacher caught them, after s/he had them dispose of the candy, she would have them stand in front of the class where s/he would administer as many as seven swats to the posterior. And they really hurt. Also they insisted upon you addressing them as "sir" or "ma'am." And you never were to say "yeah" or "uh huh." That would for sure earn you a swat.

This form of communication and fear of consequence was so ingrained in me that I continued this practice even upon my return to California, and in doing so the teachers would look at me strangely and my classmates would gibe me unmercifully. And the reason I bring this matter up is because while reading one of my reviews, the reviewer stated that the way Lawanda's father would discipline her with the use of his belt applied to her posterior appeared to be quite shocking for a minister. But back when we were in Arkansas, I saw ministers do that all the time when their children behaved unacceptable. For that matter, I remember back then receiving whippings from strangers. And my parents would voice no objections. In fact, sometimes I got the feeling my Dad enjoyed it. And that's the area that Elmo Piggins is a product of. But at the other end of the social spectrum, the South is also considered to be an almost impregnable biblical stronghold, and I knew kids as young as twelve and thirteen being licensed to preach, and some even were ordained.

Katheryn Khulman, for instance, was ordained by the Southern Baptist Church I believe at fifteen and never had any formal education beyond the tenth Grade. And that too represents the area of Elmo's upbringing. And it is my intent, in the crafting of his story in this anthology, to

more solidly portray him as a very apparent point-in-contrast to my protagonist Ishmael O'Donnell.

**Tyler:** You've also written three other stories not related to "The Call." Is there any connection between them in terms of theme perhaps? What made you decide to publish all of these stories together?

**Derald:** Well, as I mentioned in one of your earlier questions, thematic commonality that ties all these stories together rests with the notion of the tyrant dictates of institutionalism and the oppressive mind-set it imposes on the individual and his/her spirit and its means of punishing those who do not tow the line. Reginald Dexter manages for a time to elude the bonds of institutionalism while making his transition and begins to grasp a true taste of freedom during his odyssey of reinvention. Yet, at the conclusion of his story, the reader is cognizant of the notion that Reginald, for purposes of completing the process he started, although his story ends on an upbeat note, must once again submit to the demands of an institution. And you see this bondage holding fast to all the characters found within the context of this anthology. Elmo Piggins surrenders himself unconditionally to it, Daryl McGregor and Laura Porter will always bear the bruises this leviathan has inflicted upon them, and only Amos Posey in "A Litter Bit Of Wisdom" who, at a time near the end of his life, can grasp a sense of true freedom from this oppressive force while at the same time sensing his link with the Creator and the workings of the infinite.

**Tyler:** Two of the stories have military characters in them. Will you tell us a little about the role of the military in your fiction, and perhaps in your life?

**Derald:** I can write about these characters, but I find it harder for me to talk about them. A lot of it hits very close to home for me and in one particular instance one of my editors told me she was surprised I could even write about it. Last time you interviewed me, I remember you asking me how much of my novel "The Call" was actually autobiographical. I told you it was chiefly fiction. But in "Twice Upon A Prequel" one of my short stories is actually an autobiographical snapshot. That's the story entitled "Taken Up Before The General," and although the narrator of the story goes by the name of Daryl McGregor, the story is based on an actual incident that transpired while we were stationed in Kaiserslautern, Germany, and let me tell you, it was like being part of a nightmare that I just couldn't seem to wake up from.

You see, we supposedly live in a free society, and in a free society one of the rules we live by is that a person is assumed innocent until proven guilty beyond all reasonable doubt. But what they often fail to mention is that in all free societies, there are pocket dictatorships. I can state without any reservation that the military is one of those pocket dictatorships, and in this pocket dictatorship you are assumed guilty until proven innocent, and even after you are proven innocent, that does not mean you are automatically exonerated. And never expect an apology.

The best you can expect is the autocratic counsel that might go something like, "Look! It's over! I don't want to hear about it anymore! I don't want you talking about it anymore! Put it behind you! It never happened!" But it did happen --that and similar incidents over and over. And some people might be able to put it behind them. But I could not. It continually grated upon my psyche until eventually I wound up having to get counseling. That happened while I was in seminary.

I've been going off and on ever since. But, for purposes of presenting a balanced picture, I've read and talked to many former military brats who were most beholden to their fathers for providing them with such a life. In fact, you move around a lot in the military, and many of these former military progeny have chosen careers that require them to be consistently on the move.

As for me, I've lived in Santa Clara County for the past thirty years. I value sameness and stability. I may have changed residences a time or two during that time, but I've always remained in the same area.

As for "The War Comes Home," I based my Laura Porter character somewhat on my mom. Of course Laura still has her health. My mother did not. Nor did she have the capacity to return to work, but had to rely heavily on my father as the sole breadwinner and on her Social Security disability. In fact, as I was later to discover, it was that disability that got me through my two years at U.C. Davis along with a \$500 grant.

Father was quite the autocrat and was always insistent on his way, and it got to the point where Mom just got tired or arguing with him and would hold it all inward. She wound up having the worst case of rheumatoid arthritis on record, and also undergoing the most joint replacement operations on record. These operations were performed at the Presidio in San Francisco. Of course ultimately her body gave out at 64, surviving her husband by about a year-and-a-half. And everyone who attended her stated that they were surprised she lasted as long as she did.

There was also the matter of adultery that comprised a good part of our lives as a military family, which is also true in the case of Laura Porter, and is often true in cases where soldiers are sent on what is called "hardship" tours. Back in the sixties the most popular of these hardship tours were Vietnam and Korea. You've probably seen this aspect of military life portrayed on the TV program M\*A\*S\*H\* And during these tours Mom became quite cognizant of Father's extramarital dalliances, but expressed quite a bit of stoicism regarding the matter. She'd tell me, "That's just the nature of men, I suppose. If he can't get his creature comforts from me, I guess it's just his nature to look elsewhere.

When he's home, he tows the mark and I guess we should be grateful for that." So in the portrayal of Laura Porter, I drew much from my mother. And like I said, being a man and daring to step inside a woman's world, particularly a world such as my mother endured, I found to be quite the gut wrenching experience.

I often times find myself on the verge of tears as I read the ending of the story and face the reality that I belong to the more bestial of genders know as man. Like I said, I can more readily write about it than I can talk about it.

**Tyler:** Writing short stories has different requirements than writing a novel like you previously did with "The Call." Do you prefer one form, short story or novel, over the other, and why?

**Derald:** It depends upon what I'm writing about. Some things take more time in the telling, while other things do not. I mean, my last piece "A Litter Bit Of Wisdom"—I think a novel about a dinner napkin would be ridiculous. I've had a few people suggest that I should convert "The War Comes Home" into a novel, and perhaps there are other novelists who could achieve such an end. But for me, I believe the story says what it needs to say in its present length. So, I tend to use my own intuitive sense with respect to whatever format I might choose for my fiction.

**Tyler:** What do you feel is most important for a short story writer to know and try to achieve in writing fiction?

**Derald:** I believe you need to know what it is you want to say when you're writing your story. Then it's up to the writer to articulate it in such a way as to render authority to its presentation. And there are as many ways to do that as there are short stories. Everybody has a message to convey. The way the message is conveyed bears out the testimony to the power of its

conviction. The most powerful short story I ever remember reading was Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." That story impacted me like a howitzer. And the impact it left me with lasted for days. She starts out portraying a semi-rural setting like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting complete with characters you might meet at a church social. They're all there with their children casually conversing as the children play their boisterous kid games, and everything is leading up to the choosing of tickets, and you assume it's for some sort of prize. And you're left with the assumption that it must be part of the town's annual tradition because some of the town's leading citizens are presiding over the event.

Then comes the time of the drawing, and we're becoming more and more engrossed in the festivities leading up to the choosing of the winner. Then it is finally revealed what the winner is to receive. The winner is to be stoned to death by the town's folks. And what makes the story even more frightening with the revelation of this event is that the people carrying out this execution, throughout the story, are people no different than people we might know in our own home towns.

So, what is the central message Ms. Jackson is trying to convey? Violence is a major theme in "The Lottery." While the stoning is a cruel and brutal act, Jackson enhances the emotional impact of the stoning by setting the story in a seemingly civilized and peaceful society. This suggests that horrifying acts of violence can take place anywhere at any time, and they can be committed by the most ordinary of people. Jackson also addresses the psychology behind mass cruelty by presenting a community whose citizens refuse to stand as individuals and oppose the lottery and who instead unquestioningly take part in the killing of an innocent and accepted member of their village with no apparent grief or remorse. In fact, you can even imagine them returning to their homes with smiles on their faces or perhaps nothing more than a resolve to return to the normal routine of small town life. I mean, forget about the fact that you've just killed one of your own.

And then there's the theme centering around the blind following of tradition and the negative consequences of such an action. I have to say, Ms. Jackson really provided me with a lot of inspiration in the telling of this tale. And Sinclair Lewis expounded upon comparable themes when he wrote the novel It Can't Happen Here.

I've found instances throughout my life where themes such as these are still an ingrained part of the social dynamic. And I refer to incidents of hazing that transpire in college fraternities, the military, in secret societies, and even church groups. I refer specifically to this one group out in Kentucky who practice the ritual of picking up poisonous snakes and dancing around with them while raucous blue grass music is playing.

I'm sure there are other examples, but I'm drawing a blank presently as to what they are.

**Tyler:** Do you have a favorite story in this collection, and why would you choose that one particularly?

**Derald:** I think I rather like the novella "The Astonishing Elmo Piggins." And the reason I would choose this story over the others rests with the varying responses I've gotten with regards to my protagonist. One of my editors recognized him for the "little shit" that he was, while a few others were quite impressed with him and referenced him as "A stalwart man of God" and "the type of man I'd like my son to grow up to be."

To me this only exemplifies scenarios taken from real life. For instance, President Bill Clinton. He was a pervert, but even after everything was brought out into the open about the man, there were still those who leaped to his defense and I've even seen on the internet certain historical societies describing him as one of our best presidents. Another example is Harvey Milk, also a pervert. And I don't just mean because of his homosexuality. He was known to have

male sex partners who were just in their early teens. But they made a movie about his life, attempted to name a holiday after him, and in a certain area of California, hold him in a high state of reverence. In fact I'm sure certain people who read this interview will rise up in indignation over my words and say something to the effect of "How dare you malign the character of such great individuals!" Or "Who are you to stand in judgment of such great men?" But it's "great" men such as these who harbor the potential of leading us to the precipice of disaster.

For instance, anybody remember a man named Jim Jones? He was revered greatly by his followers. We found out about him, but by the time we did, look at the damage he caused. It's like Sinclair Lewis's character Elmer Gantry. You keep thinking he'll eventually get his comeuppance, but he never does. Neither does Elmo. There are those among us with the gift of charisma, and that's a dangerous gift to be endowed with, because, for the most part, no one holds them accountable. And those that see through the façade they project often times hold themselves mute for fear of inviting the wrath of their followers. You see this taking place near the end of Elmo Piggins' story.

Remember how Elmo's mother and father hold their silence as praise and plaudits are heaped upon him by the congregation? And although it's never fully spelled out, I believe the perceptive reader can see, with all the adulation Elmo is receiving, a healthy degree of narcissism setting in. And anyone with a modicum of perception is sure to note this dynamic taking place over and over again in real life.

Again I reference Bill Clinton. At one point he was labeled "the Teflon president" because nothing ever stuck to him. And after all the scandal, all he could say as he stepped down as Commander-in-Chief was "It was fun." I've been called a writer of satire, but in instances such as these, life seems to write its own satire.

**Tyler:** Thank you for the interview, Derald. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information we can find there about "Twice Upon a Prequel...& Three Shorts"?

**Derald:** Well, the information on "Twice Upon A Prequel" is not complete yet. So far I've gotten three reviews, I've listed all the stores that are selling book, and there will be more information about the book as we progress. This interview should be on the site and hopefully a trailer, and some radio excerpts. The book's only been out for the past few weeks, so it still remains a work in progress.

My website is [www.dhamiltonbooks.com](http://www.dhamiltonbooks.com). My email address is [dthecall12@aol.com](mailto:dthecall12@aol.com). You can also see the trailer of The Call on my website, or you can go to youtube and log is under "the call by derald Hamilton. You need to list my name when you log in. Otherwise you might get Regina Spector's work of the same name. And, as always, I welcome whatever feedback you feel inclined to send me. Without feedback I can't grow as a writer, and like the lyrics of an old country and western song put it, "I'm just an old chunk of coal, but I'm gonna be a diamond someday. Of course I can't be that diamond without your help.

# **Author Interview with Derald Hamilton**

## *Twice Upon a Prequel and Three short Stories*

Interview by Suzanne Gattis for Pacific Book Review

March 2012

Today we have the pleasure to have with us Derald Hamilton to discuss his newly published book titled, *Twice Upon a Prequel and Three short Stories*. Derald, thank you for joining us!

**DH:** Thank you for having me. And thank you also for your very insightful review of my work.

**PBR:** Your use of character development is extraordinary. What process do you use to develop your characters?

**DH:** Well, when you've lived long enough, you get the chance to meet all types of people and get exposed to all types of patterns and events. Years ago I remember reading this one book called "scripts People Live." It came out a couple of years after Eric Berne's "Games People Play." Not to say that there aren't any variations on the patterns these authors lay down, but the principles these two books lay out gives you pretty good insights regarding the workings of interpersonal interactions. Also, having moved around quite a bit, being part of a military family, I tended to note that there are certain types of people that are indigenous to certain areas of the country. For instance, I noted in your review you stated that my novella "The Astonishing Elmo Piggins" played off the stereotype of the Southern preacher's kid. And that may be true, but there are reasons why stereotypes exist, and just because we who dabble in the fine art of literature have labeled them such does not necessarily mean that these stereotypical caricatures are not still walking among us in this three dimensional world. I remember when I was in the seventh grade back in Arkansas, there was this guy I knew who was one grade ahead of me who already had his license to preach.

And he fit all the attributes I ascribed to Elmo Piggins as a young adult, i.e. the erect posture, a stern facial expression that denoted an extreme sense of conviction, a block style haircut, solidly squared cheeks, firmly jutted jaw, and, like many who ascribed to this supposed stereotype, a bit of athletic prowess went with the package. Also, because it was during the very early sixties when I knew this individual, racism figured greatly into the picture and he thought nothing of rendering high praises to Jesus while at the same time speaking disparagingly of those with darker pigmentation. I played this part down with Elmo. After all, the crux of Elmo's story takes place in the seventies, and at that time the South was becoming more enlightened with regards to aspect of race relations. But the stereotypical preacher's kid was still very much alive in the South.

By the way, I wasn't around to see it, but I'm betting that military conscription was also a part of the package the Arkansas boy preacher carried with him. Years later, while I was in seminary, I remember reading an article in the Ozark Bible College newspaper about a recent graduate who claimed that God called him to serve as an officer in the United States Marine Corps.

I've also drawn from composite personality types I've come across in the academic settings I've been a part of. And being the age I am presently, I've become fairly cognizant of the issues related to the reinvention of self as portrayed in "The Rebirth of Reginald Dexter." In fact, to add greater authenticity to my writing, at the tender age of 56 I even attempted skydiving. It was a terrifying experience, but there are times when an author has to revert to extreme measures to lend authenticity to his writing.

In my story "The War Comes Home" I draw a good deal from my mother in the portrayal of Laura Porter, although my mother wasn't quite as capable and proactive as my protagonist. And, for the most part, Daryl McGregor in "Taken Up Before The General," for all intents and purposes is me. The story is based upon an event that actually transpired while we were stationed in Kaiserslautern, Germany. One of the publications I submitted this story to stated that I dealt too heavily in stereotypes. They were, of course, referencing how I portrayed the military people. But, as I said earlier, just because they come across as stereotypes doesn't make them any less real. I had a military man for a father and had been around military types most of my life, so I knew my portrayal was pretty accurate.

So, to sum it all up, I guess you could say I draw from real life.

**PBR:** Do you have any characters that you yourself cannot relate to? Or perhaps said a different way, some you will not include in your work?

**DH:** I haven't run across that issue as yet, so I really don't know how to answer that question. But I can tell you, after having lived so long, even the implausible takes on attributes of plausibility and the absurd becomes more and more the norm. So at this juncture I would be inclined to say "No." Now, having said that I can just bet there will be someone or something that comes along to prove me a liar.

**PBR:** How would you best describe your goal of character development? Is your goal to make your readers empathize or sympathize with your characters?

**DH:** My goal chiefly is to tell a story. Whether my reader sympathizes or empathizes with my characters for me is of secondary importance, although I might ask the question, "Okay, this is my character. Is he a likeable sort or not? It's sort of like what the comedian Andy Kaufman did in many of his routines, like a man having a nervous breakdown. Is that funny? A man going through a religious conversion. Is that funny? A man getting clobbered at a wrestling match. Is that funny? My protagonist Elmo Piggins--what's your take on him? Do you like him or not? Is he a stalwart, righteous man of God, or, as one of my editors called him, "a little shit?" My character Daryl McGregor--is he truly worthy of your sympathy, or is he just an incorrigible brat who could stand a good ass kicking. A cousin of mine read the story and she said she did not like the boy. And then there's Reginald Dexter. I didn't even bother with the question of sympathy or empathy. All I was trying to say is, so your employer put you out to pasture. That doesn't necessarily mean you have to put yourself out to pasture. Be creative. Take some risks. Step outside your stodgy safety zone.

What have you got to lose? Whatever that might be, the gains will most likely outweigh the loss. So in my writing, my concentration is mainly on the message of the story, or if there is no



clearly defined message, like in my stories "Taken Up Before The General" and "The Astonishing Elmo Piggins" my concentration rests chiefly with the telling of the story. They've been labeled as satire, but it's a funny thing about satire. As I mentioned in a previous interview, when Sinclair Lewis wrote the novel "Babbit" he portrayed his protagonist, a businessman, giving a speech before a gathering. That speech, given the circumstantial surroundings in which it was given, gave me cause to wince and go "ouch" because of my sense with regards to the sheer irony of the situations present within the story's context and the audacity of the protagonist's words. Yet, I'm sure there may have been some who read the book who may have felt inclined to say "Right on!" or "That guy is right on the money!"

After all, that same speech, that was set against the backdrop of the roaring twenties, was given again, word per word, back in 1965 at the Rotary Club in Sacramento, and was given a standing ovation. Another example hit home for me while watching an episode of the TV sit-com "All In The Family." While watching the show, my father walked in and made me turn it off. As my mother later explained, my father agreed wholeheartedly with Archie Bunker's sentiments and did not appreciate him being held up to the light of ridicule. I remember seeing a similar incident in the movie "The Hindenberg" during a sequence where there was an entertainment troupe performing the satirical number "There's a lot to be said for the Nazis." Right in the middle of the performance, a Nazi officer came forth and stopped the show, expressly stating, "I'm afraid your humor and ours' do not match."

So it all seems like a very subject matter and I find it best to allow that element of subjectivity to play out its hand.

**PBR:** You have had many experiences as noted in your online blogs and website. Are any of your stories based off of your real life experiences?

**DH:** Yes. "Taken Up Before The General" was actually based on an incident that transpired while we were stationed in Kaiserslauter, Germany. back then, we couldn't just take a DNA sample, so I was naturally assumed guilty until proven innocent. And in "The War Comes Home," incidents of that nature I've seen played out a ton of times, as I'm sure my more prominent counterpart Pat Conroy has as well. If I recall, there was quite a telling airport scene in his novel "The Great Zantini." And usually it's the mother that serves as the buffer to any situational conflict that may ensue. But in this instance, my intent was to portray what the buffer must be going through. And to do this, I drew heavily from my mother. And for me, her death was the most telling with regards to all the stresses she endured over the years right up to the last. So, at times, my writing has proven itself to be somewhat cathartic, and in this instance, I'm hoping that wherever she is right now, she feels somewhat vindicated by this story. I know Pat Conroy's mother did when she filed to divorce his father. I've heard that while in court, Mrs. Conroy simply handed the judge a copy of her son's book "The Great Santini" and said "Here, your honor, I rest my case." Of course, there are some of my characters I either just make up or base upon a composite of people I've know over the years, like in the case of Reginald Dexter. Of course to lend some authority to the prose of that story, I took it upon myself to try skydiving at the tender age of 56. And in this instance, I do mean tender age. After the performance of such a feat I was swiftly brought to the realization that I wasn't a kid anymore.

**PBR:** Religion is a prominent theme in your stories. Do you believe writing about this topic adds an extra layer to your stories?

**DH:** Yes. Growing up I remember father constantly admonishing me to avoid all discussion regarding politics and religion. Of course it's these topics that are often times responsible for much of the trauma we experience from life. For instance, the place I worked at for the past 30 some years--I found that advancement within the organization was chiefly political--as we grew fond of calling it, "a good old boy network." I amassed a good deal of credentials over the years, but in many instances high school drop outs were hired before I was hired. And you heard numerous tales of people who slept their way to the top. I remember one time I conferred with a counselor at the community college I had attended. She wanted to convince me to take more courses. Of course she found it hard to dispute the fact that I had taken practically every course offered that was germane to my work. Then I asked her, "You got any courses that could make me a 'good old boy?'"

She, in turn said, "Have you thought of taking Golf?"

As for religion, if ever I had cause for massive trauma, it's been by way of the church. Within that sphere of influence those in power talk to you very condescendingly, and maybe even go as far as to threaten you with hellfire to keep you in your place. But the irony here rests with the fact that I didn't really learn how to assert myself until after I began seminary. For me, among the times I felt put on the spot was attending a church function during my early adolescents and being singled out and asked to lead in the prayer.

It wasn't until after I attended seminary when I learned to give myself permission, among a group of people to say, "No, I'd rather not." And most generally nobody would say anything about your refusal to do so. And if they did I found I could always counter with something like, "You know, I'd really rather not talk about that? Could we talk about something else?" Looking back on instances such as these I can't help but wish I had this skill of interaction back when I was a child.

One thing I discovered during my maturation process is that parents generally fall short in the preparation of helping the child become an adult. And assertiveness is one of the skills that parents are very reticent about teaching their kids, mainly because in doing so it calls for them to relinquish some of the power they may have over them. And religion is one of the items parents use to wield power over their progeny, just like politics is a means politicians use to wield power over the masses. In my story "The Astonishing Elmo Piggins" you see this dynamic at work in numerous places. You see Elmo's sister Lawanda constantly on the receiving end. But Lawanda reacts more aggressively, and aggressiveness requires a lot of energy.

When Elmo calls her on the carpet during the church service where he is preaching, she responds by going forward and belting him a good one in front of the entire congregation. This makes for an exciting scenario and I've heard from a number of my readers that the scene made them want to stand up and cheer. But for me, I can't help but think that she would have used up a lot less energy by simply getting up and walking out. Of course in doing so, the story wouldn't have

been quite as interesting. But often times I have found religion to be one of the great all time oppressive agents.

I've also found it to be a great American tradition to root for the underdog. And when an underdog fights against and ultimately triumphs over oppression, we onlookers often take this as an opportunity to cheer. So, many cheered for Lawanda in that instance. Of course in the end, the oppressive agent was still very much alive, and in Elmo, it would flourish. So, Lawanda's victory was a fleeting one at best. After all, institutions are, for the most part, stronger than individuals. Religion is one such institution

**PBR:** What are you presently working on?

**DH:** Presently I am trying to plot out a novel I've entitled "Transit." I just retired after spending 30 plus years working for the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Agency, so if that doesn't qualify me to write about the inner goings on of such an agency, I don't know what does. Of course I don't expect to be finished with the project for some time, mainly because the marketing of "The Call" and "Twice Upon A Prequel" has eclipsed all other activities.

**PBR:** What types of feedback are you getting from readers of *Twice Upon A Prequel And Three Short Stories*?

**DH:** So far it's been mostly positive, and much to my shock, a lot of it has struck me as being even more positive than what I received for "The Call."

**PBR:** This has all been very interesting, and we all wish you the best of continued success. Thank you again for joining with us today.

**DH:** Thank you. It's been a pleasure.