

## Aspen meets Joe Henry, neighbor and novelist

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Joe Henry spent an hour on stage Monday, most of it with his eyes closed and his hands folded motionlessly in his lap.

It was Henry's first foray into public speaking in Aspen. He has lived in Woody Creek for nearly four decades, solitarily writing in a cabin beside the Roaring Fork River. His first novel, "Lime Creek," was published last week by Random House.

At Monday's event at the Aspen Institute, which kicked off the Aspen Writers' Foundation's 35th annual Summer Words Literary Festival, Henry had his friend, the actor Anthony Zerbe, read aloud from the book to 100-some festival attendees.

Henry opened his eyes and answered questions from the audience for about 10 minutes.

"I'd actually like to hear four sentences strung together," Zerbe prodded the soft-spoken and reclusive writer.

Zerbe, whose acting credits include playing the villain in the James Bond film "License to Kill," gave an animated reading of Henry's evocative prose, going through two full chapters from the novel-in-stories. It brought some chuckles and ahhs from the audience of locals, world authors and festival workshop students — but mostly it elicited an attentive silence.

The reading left at least one attendee, Annie Denver, wife of the late John Denver, in tears. Henry co-wrote songs with Denver through the height of his career, and moved to Aspen at the legendary folk singer's urging, in 1974.

In his brief remarks, Henry spoke bluntly about his devotion to his art, about writing through the night, every night, alone in a writing room he calls "the box," throughout the winters in Woody Creek.

"My nature is much closer to an animal than a human," he explained, "in that I've never felt I had choices. It's not like it [writing] came from ambition, or even motivation. It was something I needed to do. It's breathing."

And after decades writing alone, Henry dispelled any notions of magic or glamour in the process of creating fiction.

"Writing is about one thing," he said, paraphrasing screenwriter William Goldman. "Going into a room and doing it."

Henry also may have ruffled some feathers among the tuition-paying festival students when he told them he believed writers cannot be taught the craft.

"I think you can't really learn to be an artist," he said, telling of his disaffection with workshops he attended at the University of Iowa's prestigious creative writing program. "It's a facility that's given to us or not. You can learn to improve what you have if you have it, but you can't go to school to learn it."

Yet Henry appeared to be a hit. The festival's on-site bookstore sold out every copy of "Lime Creek" on hand, and a line to have Henry sign it snaked through the lobby of the Aspen Institute's Doerr-Hosier building long after his presentation.

In an interview last week, Henry spoke about the abrupt shift of moving out of his very private world to share his work and himself with readers.

"It's a new reality," he said.

The pages that became "Lime Creek" were taken to a literary agent by a local friend of Henry's, despite his reluctance to share them.

The writing unexpectedly set off a bidding war among 10 publishing houses, with Random House winning out.

Henry said the act of writing itself has driven him, not any expectations of literary fame or even publication.

"I have faith in my work but I never presumed something was going to happen," he said. "I just felt it was good enough to speak to people ... The writing owns me. It really is my master and I have no choice in the matter."

Over the last few decades, his largely unseen work and his solitary existence have grown to mythic proportions around Aspen. Henry is rumored to have penned thousands of hand-written pages. "Lime Creek," culled from that expansive output, is an elegant work, coming in at 160 pages.



Andrew Travers/Aspen Daily News  
Actor Anthony Zerbe (left) talks with author Joe Henry during Aspen Writers' Foundation's 35th annual Summer Words Literary Festival on Monday.

The book contains eight linked stories about a ranching family. The writing is mostly terse and pathos-rich, building to moments where Henry lets his poet's pen loose in gorgeous, lyrical and sparsely-punctuated paragraphs that will quicken the pace of any lover of the English language.

In those moments, and there are many of them in this slim book, Henry transcends any staid notions of "western writing." Yes, there are stories about the messy

birth of a foal, the heart-wrenching death of a beloved mare, the crossing over into manhood of a young ranch-hand stranded horseless in a sub-zero snowstorm.

But the subtle ambition of "Lime Creek" is to chart the maddeningly rough-cut pathways of the human heart, their poignant intersections where fear meets courage, and where longing turns either to loss or love. In its best moments, this book does for the world of tack and horseshoes what Tim O'Brien did for war stories — elevating them beyond time or place or genre.

"Everything is universal," Henry said last week. "Nobody can create new human emotions that have never been felt before. So every one of us, in the end, is the same."

Asked about his local reputation as a Salinger-esque hermitted genius, Henry said he was genuinely surprised that anyone knew he was a writer, or even living here.

Often for months at a time while he's writing, he said, the only person he interacts with is the clerk at the Woody Creek post office or the fellow weight-lifters at his gym.

He writes by pencil, purging the stories in his head in a flood of unpunctuated prose. He revises, he said, by going back and typing his work on an old Selectric typewriter, then reading it aloud to himself until it sounds right. A quiet Luddite, he doesn't use a computer or a cell phone.

In recent years, Henry has spent his summers in Los Angeles, New York and Nashville, working with musicians as a songwriter. Since John Denver's untimely death, he's partnered with the likes of Garth Brooks and Rascal Flatts writing songs.

He was living in Los Angeles in the early '70s, and working with Denver when he made the move to Woody Creek. As Henry tells it, he was planning a retreat back to the mountains of eastern Wyoming, where he grew up and in which "Lime Creek" is set.

"I had never heard of Aspen," he recalled. "But I said to John, 'I really have to get back to the mountains. Are there any mountains there?' He laughed and he said, 'Come look.' I've been here ever since."

His first brush with fame came in the mid-'70s, when a Newsweek magazine reporter, in a cover story about John Denver, described Henry as Denver's writing partner and a "sensitive cowboy poet."

Henry recalled going into the Aspen Ice Garden afterward, to play in a club hockey game, as he used to, and meeting his surprised local teammates.

"When I came into the locker room, 20 guys started screaming, 'Here comes the sensitive cowboy poet!'" he laughed. "None of them had ever known I was a writer."

Such exposure has been rare for Henry. A former boxer and minor league hockey player who spent his young life breaking horses and bones, he retreated to write poetry and fiction in Woody Creek in his early 30s, as his beaten body took him off of the ice rink and out of the boxing ring.

"As closed off as I try to stay in the physical world, I lay the whole thing out on paper," he said. "I'm sure that's probably a function for a lot of artists, that catharsis."

Though Aspen still may not get to know Joe Henry himself, many who've picked up "Lime Creek" are hoping he'll share more of his work in the future.

Zerbe, to whom the book is co-dedicated, promised Monday's audience that many more books of prose and poetry Henry has crafted in his local sanctuary will make it onto their bookshelves.

"This is the very first we've heard from him," Zerbe teased, "but we are going to hear a lot from him down the line."

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