

RUSSELL GREGORY AND CENTICORE BOOKS IN ANN ARBOR

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By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Every college town probably has a local bookstore where everyone who is 'anyone' educated hangs out. In Ann Arbor in the late 1960s (pre-Borders), that was Centicore Books, originally on Maynard Street, but relocated to South University. Somewhere I read that the official title was "Paper Back Bookstore and Centicore Modern Poetry Shop." It was the South University period I am writing about here. Sure there were other bookstores in Ann Arbor, but this particular one is where both the students and professors bought their books and hung out. Centicore was the place where you might run into Andy Warhol, Norman Mailer, or John Cage when they were in town. Centicore was "the" place.

And what made it that 'place' was a single individual, Russell Gregory. He didn't own the store but he made the store what it was. He knew more about books and literature than any of us, professors included. And he was not simply a walking inventory of book names. He had read them all and could talk to you about them with real intelligence. Literally everyone who read knew Russell.

And he not only read books, understood them, and could guide any of us to where the best parts were, he also was a poet and writer (journals and essays). It was not enough for Russell to hold forth at the bookstore, he also had years of weekly get-togethers at his home at which all were welcome and great discussions took place. While the above is remarkable, that alone was not what endeared Russell Gregory to me.

Russell Gregory is a living Transcendentalist, just like Whitman, Emerson, and Thorough, the only one I have ever encountered who not only carries that lineage but is able to project it into your consciousness and: what a view!

Russell Gregory in the Centicore bookstore pointing out which books on a topic are important and just why is one thing, important in itself, but Russell after hours or off in a corner of the shop actually reenacting the mental landscape of the Transcendentalists, empowering you in its vision is quite another. His ability to make that unique American philosophy actually come to life and live again or live on was another. Gregory's sense of local history, his sense of "place," was profound.

I am not talking about imparting the history of people, times, and places from a bygone era, but rather a sheer transport into those realms. You are there and those thoughts live again in you, now! Russell had that power and he shared it with those who could receive it, whenever possible. I would say Russell Gregory lived for those moments.

Personally he was about as polite and careful in his dress and mannerisms as a human can be and yet he was also able to show you just enough of the edge of what he did not like for you to be guided. He was no stranger to opinions, just very careful to deliver them in such a way as not to be offensive. I wish I had that talent!

In time Centicore and the 1960s went the way of the world and two brothers named Border took over and launched a completely different kind of bookstore in Ann Arbor. Russell eventually left Ann Arbor and moved back closer to his roots in Ionia, Michigan, where he lives today. He

served as the editor of the local Ionia newspaper for many years and I wish I had time to research what he did with that newspaper. I am sure it was remarkable. Gregory now works part-time at Schuller's Books in Grand Rapids, still guiding readers to the best of the best and I am sure occasionally empowering lucky souls in American ideas.

I can remember one time I was being a little assy and chided him for not writing any poems recently. He turned and looked me dead in the eye and said: "Michael, these days my best poems are walking around Ann Arbor." Enough said. I got the point.