

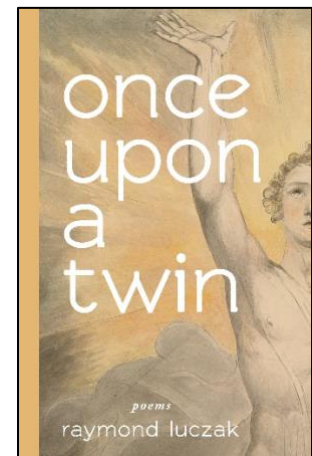
An Interview with Raymond Luczak, Author of *once upon a twin: poems*

Gallaudet University Press: Your identity as a Deaf gay man plays a prominent role in *once upon a twin*. Do you see yourself as an advocate or role model for others with similar lived experiences? Is that part of your motivation as a writer?

Raymond Luczak: It's funny. Even though I do write about the Deaf gay experience and do appreciate it when readers take notice of my work, I truly don't think of myself as a role model or an advocate. Me, a role model? I'm just me! Being put up on a pedestal, if that's what it is, feels rather uncomfortable for me. I'd much prefer that others be as unique as they are and not try to emulate me or anyone else. We have more than enough copycats in our society as it is.

GU Press: There are strong themes running throughout the collection of loneliness, longing, and the desire to connect with others (hence the overarching theme of imagining how your life would be different if you had a twin). Did you set out at the beginning to engage with these emotions, or did they naturally develop as you pondered the idea of having a twin?

Luczak: The themes of loneliness, longing, and the desire to connect with others spring from the fact that I grew up in a large hearing family, and that I was not allowed to use sign until I was 14 years old. Until then, I'd suffered endlessly from the Dinner Table Syndrome. That's why I don't feel a strong connection with my hearing family. When I began writing this book, I wasn't planning to focus on my (lack of) connection with my hearing family; I'd already addressed this topic one way or another in my earlier work. I was more interested in uncovering my inchoate thoughts and fantasies about being a twin, and one thing led to another in the process of writing. Often, when I start a new book, I rarely know what the final result will look like. I simply have a concept, and with my poetry, I usually set up a set of parameters that the new book would operate within. For *once upon a twin*, I'd intuited that this book shouldn't have capitalization, punctuation, and the like, which was wholly unlike my previous collections; I wasn't sure why it had to be so until much later. The conveyance of such not-quite-realized language has enabled me to evoke a sense of incompleteness; a sense of halved-ness.



GU Press: How long have you played with the idea of having a twin? Is this something you've carried with you for a long time?

Luczak: Once my mother told me at age 16 the first story about the miscarriage that happened in the year I was born, I began to wonder. Was I really a twin? Was such a thing indeed possible? I mulled the question for decades afterward, more so when she told other conflicting stories about the miscarriage. My questioning wasn't of a specific nature; it was vaguely a hypothetical concept that floated on the periphery of my dreams. But once I discovered that yes, it was indeed possible for one of the twins to miscarry, the thought never left me. When I finally decided to explore the what-if possibilities of having a twin, I went full bore with the idea, imagining how different my life would've been with a twin within the context of my hearing family. Basically, the book enabled me to articulate a lot of things I had been afraid to say.

GU Press: Your poetry is raw, honest, and deals with childhood trauma. Is writing therapeutic for you?

Luczak: Even though I may've had a difficult childhood, I don't see writing as therapy. I see myself as more of a storyteller than anything else. How can I tell a story (or share a memory) most effectively? How can I show this moment more clearly? Where should this part of the story go? Where does this poem fit into the book? When I'm rewriting and editing my own work, I'm always trying to answer a lot of questions that my readers wouldn't have to ask.

GU Press: There is a vulnerability that comes with revealing intimate details about yourself. How do you manage that vulnerability?

Luczak: This book is a peculiar bird in the sense that I'd decided early on in my career as a Deaf writer *not* to make the same mistake that a few Deaf writers had made in their initial forays into publishing. They'd write their autobiographies and memoirs as their first books, and once their novelty had worn off, they'd never get another book published again. The industry had exploited such Deaf writers due to their "novelty" factor. I didn't want to put myself in a position where I'd be a one-book wonder, so I made a very conscious choice not to write a true memoir early on. I wrote anything but memoirs. Due to my current track record as a writer, I suppose I could now write a memoir and know that I wouldn't be treated like another one-book wonder. That said, I have become more and more open about some details of my life over the years, mainly because my self-esteem is stronger than before. One could say that much of my oeuvre as a poet is indeed a memoir in progress, with each book a momentous chapter.

GU Press: Is it easier or more difficult to write your own experiences, as opposed to creating a fictional character?

Luczak: As long as I'm feeling inspired, I don't see any difference in terms of "difficulty" sharing my own experiences or creating a fictional piece. The challenge is always in the details, though: is this story best shown in a poem? Or in an essay? Or as a scene in a stage play? Or reimagined in fiction? Once I know which format is best for what I want to say, the rest is easy (well, usually!).

GU Press: In the poem "heretics" you show a kind of reverence for sign language, "a language wholly ours." You learned ASL as a young adult when you attended Gallaudet. How did this change your world, and how did it influence your creative expression?

Luczak: Once I arrived at Gallaudet on July 19, 1984 and saw so much ASL—up close and personal!—in the Ely Student Center, I was irrevocably changed. ASL transformed me into a true social butterfly after being cocooned for the first 18 years of my life. Suddenly I wasn't a freak. Being deaf wasn't a big deal anymore, and yet, it really was for me in a very profound way: it became a cultural—rather than pathological—identity. In a dramatic fashion, being at Gallaudet had redeemed me; it emboldened me because I knew I had genuine value as a human being. I hadn't truly grasped just how much my hearing family and classmates had made me feel less than them, so articulating such examples, both subtle and blatant, through my work has become a lifelong process of discovery. Like Hannah Gadsby pointed out so memorably in her Netflix standup special *Nanette*, "my story has value."