

4. "It gave me confidence to be a storyteller" -- An Interview with Robert Earl Stewart

Robert Earl Stewart is a writer, poet, photographer and former reporter for *The Windsor Star*. Robert Earl Stewart's first collection of poetry published in 2009, *Something Burned Along the Southern Border* (Mansfield Press), was shortlisted for the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award. His poems have been published in journals in Canada, the U.S., and Great Britain. In 2010, he received the Windsor Endowment for the Arts' grant for Emerging Artist in Literary Arts.

Having grown up in Windsor, Robert received a B.A in English from the University of Windsor and an M.A in English from McGill University in Montreal, where he also assisted in teaching 20th Century American fiction. In the spring of 1999, he returned to Windsor to work as the editor of a sports newspaper. Later, he spent two years as a reporter and photographer for *The Windsor Star*.

In May of 2011, his poetry collection, *Campfire Radio Rhapsody*, was published. *Campfire Radio Rhapsody* features shadowy trains, a cab-driving opera singer, a multi-armed mollusk, and a mass exodus of clowns. His latest work, *The Running-Shaped Hole*, examines how running affected Stewart as a husband, father, recovered alcoholic, journalist, bookseller, and writer. He is also the author of "The Best Wrestling Match I Never Saw: The Rise and Fall of the RPWA" in *Canadian Notes and Queries*. (<https://www.notesandqueries.ca/>)

What is your story, with professional wrestling?

The sweet spot, at least for me, was the rise of Hulkamania (84, 85, 86). Suddenly wrestling was on mainstream television on Saturday mornings. You didn't have to have local access cable station to see a small promotion doing a card at a local arena. Suddenly it was Hulk Hogan. It was Junkyard Dog. It was Rowdy Roddy Piper and Ricky Steamboat; it was the cast of the first *WrestleMania*, wrestling on television every Saturday morning.

I remember the first time I sat down and watched wrestling with my cousins I can't remember the opponent, but it was Moondog Spot¹. There was a whole bunch of Moondogs² and they all wore shaggy, white beards and they wore cut off jeans. Moondog Spot would come out with a giant soup bone that still had meat on it. The first card I went to was with my dad at Joe Louis Arena in Detroit. The main event was Hogan and Ricky Steamboat against Don Morocco and

1. Larry Wayne Booker (June 6, 1952 – November 29, 2003), better known by his ring names Moondog Spot and Larry Latham.
2. The wrestlers utilizing the Moondog gimmick included: Moondog King (Edward White), Moondog Rex (Randy Colley), Moondog Spot (Larry Booker), Moondog Spike (William Smithson), Moondog Cujo (Lanny Kean), Moondog Baron (DJ Baron) Moondog Buddy (Sean Taylor) Moondog Bernard (Casey Bernauer) Moondog Davis (Chris Dillon) Moondog Duke (Frank Cody) Moondog Fido (Buddy Donovan) Moondog Fifi (Diane Von Hoffman) Moondog Grizzly (Ted Grizzly) Moondog Hammer (David Hammer) Moondog Mange (Jimmy Stone) Moondog Max (John Walton) Moondog Mayne (Lonnie Mayne) Moondog Molsonn (Jak Molsonn) Moondog Moretti (Ed Moretti) Moondog Mort (Joel Goltry) Moondog Nathan (Nathan Randolph) Moondog Pongo (Charles Richards) Moondog Puppy Love (Mike Flowers) Moondog Ravage (Brad Worell) Moondog Rex (Nathan Brian Randolph) Moondog Rover (Paul J. Mcknight) Moondog Runt (James McClain) Moondog Spike (William Wantland) Moondog Splash (Charles Edward Harrell) Moondog Splat (Robert White) Moondog Spot (Tony Nardo) Moondog Wenzel (Bryan Wenzel) Moondog X (Brian Jellison) Moondog Super (Peter Beshai).

Mr. Fuji. Hogan and Steamboat won by DQ. Then my cousins (Andrew and Glenn) and I started going to cards in Detroit all the time. I was 12 years old and we're getting on a bus to watch wrestling in a foreign country.

In one of Canada's official ghost towns, Olinda, Ontario, there's a little Unitarian Universalist church.³ That's where I met my friend Ben, and we created the Role-Playing Wrestling Alliance (RPWA) game together.

I think both my parents and Ben's parents were a little bit leery, even ashamed, of our passion for wrestling. My parents thought that my love of wrestling was kind of beneath me. But then I met Ben, this other high-achieving kid in the confines of the Unitarian Universalist church and we were both mad about wrestling. We would spend most of the Sunday school portion of church talking about the wrestling we'd watched the day before. Ben introduced me to *Dungeons and Dragons*, and The Role-Playing Wrestling Alliance was just a natural collision of our interests.

Do you find that there's anything about wrestling is a form of theater or storytelling that has impacted your own work as a writer?

Ben and I were both in charge of our own stable of wrestlers, but the game really took on a life outside of the actual matches (which of course were going on in our heads). We were really having a blast creating the personas. We did [pre-match] interviews with our version of Mean Gene Okerlund.

Ben's sister would watch us. She was a year younger than me and I was trying to impress her by doing the voices of my wrestler. I remember her not being nearly as impressed as I had hoped.

We were trying to nail the personalities and their ticks. One of the things you rolled for when you created these characters was "Do they have any psychological damage?" If so, you were responsible to act those out and to try to make them real.

When it comes to what it brought to my storytelling: I think it gave me confidence. I think it helped me have a deeper appreciation of the arts. It colored my appreciation of music. It colored my appreciation of film, photography, even maybe things like fashion. Most importantly, I think it gave me confidence to be a storyteller.

That's amazing, actually. That's really, really interesting.

Thirty-five years later I think back to some of the late-night wrestling in The Role-Playing Wrestling Alliance. We would design these giant cards and we would have a sleepover. I would sleep at Ben's house or he would sleep at my house and we'd be up until dawn playing the game, playing out the card.

The instant hit of nostalgia that I get from that is huge. When Ben's in town we always get together for a coffee and we laugh retelling the same stories, reliving the classic moments – the upsets, the title changes, the dramatic and improbable story arcs – and the laughs we had playing it all out.

How would you talk about your broader arc as a writer?

I have two books of poetry, one published in 2009, called *Something Burned Along the Southern Border* and in 2011 a second collection, *Campfire Radio Rhapsody* came out. I worked at the *Windsor Star* and later the *LaSalle Post*. I spent the better part of 15 years working as a newspaper reporter, photographer, and editor.

Through a lot of that, I weighed almost 400 pounds. I'm only about five foot nine. I was not happy; I was certainly not where I wanted to be with my health. I'd been sober for about 10 years at that time, but I had never given up my love of eating and food.

I made a change and I started running. In high school I was a football player; I played baseball; I was on the swim team. That was when I was a teenager, with a teenaged boy's metabolism. When I finished grad school and went straight into the late nights of newspaper work and the party life... It was a very sedentary lifestyle, but I was still eating like I was 17 years old and running wind sprints every day.

I got back to running and, over a period of a year and a bit, I lost about 140 pounds. I ran half-marathons. I was approached by a publisher about writing a book about my experience. I'd been keeping a running journal for a while, and I'd always thought, *I wonder if there's anything here*. I don't think I was thinking that it could become a memoir because

3. Olinda is located between the towns Essex and Leamington and was once the home of iron mining for the region.

I had only just turned 40 years old. I was thinking maybe a story of some kind, like fiction or poetry. But it turned out to be a memoir. It came out in 2022.

There's elements of mild depression that get involved in both the storytelling and the focus that I need to be a writer. I use that depression as an excuse not to go running, so sometimes months can go by between runs, and then I'll get right back into it. And then I'll be running every other day for like, you know, seven, eight, 10 months, I'll miss a couple of runs, and I'll feel demotivated and I'll overeat... and then I'll get into a bad headspace and I won't run. It is obviously very cyclical.

So, *The Running-Shaped Hole* is not a book about how to run. It's a memoir about my life as a writer and a father and a husband and a journalist.

There's a spiritual element to the book, in relation to my recovery as an alcoholic. It's more about finding a personal place of spirituality, which running actually helped me find. Running helped me get to a deeper level because what running really is for me is a form of meditation. What people call the runner's high, it helped me. And yet, when I need to clear up headspace, and when I need to feel more confident, or when I really need it the most, those are the times I turn my back on running for some reason. When I need the headspace, when I need the meditative aspect is when I am least likely to go.

I'm going for a run today, though. I need to practice it and establish it as a pattern in my life.

I love what you're bringing to this. Some of the folks who write about wrestling — they're almost always, I hate to phrase it this way, *downer stories*, *stories of disappointment*, *of illusions broken*. It feels like your story is not a *downer story*, right?

It's not a downer story, but it's a realistic story. What I learned was that an unrealistic focus on perfection and idealism is not healthy. Even when I did run and even when I was at my peak physical condition (in about 2015), I still weighed 240 pounds. When I was running half marathons, I couldn't qualify for life insurance because I was considered morbidly obese by the insurance industry.

Running has helped me find a place where it's okay to want something different for yourself. I think a lot of people are set up for depression and failure down the road because they are grow up within this framework of "do your homework and you'll get an awesome job and everything will be great and you'll be healthy and you'll be fit and you'll be happy and successful." But this idealized life is a myth. And running, oddly, helped me realize that. I can see how my interest and the fun I had with professional wrestling when I was younger helped me navigate those waters.