

A Conversation with Robert Strong

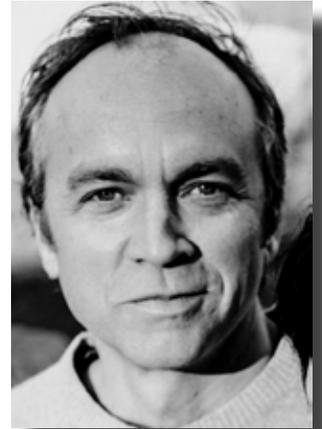
author of *Bright Advent*

THE MARIE ALEXANDER POETRY SERIES

AN IMPRINT OF WHITE PINE PRESS / P. O. BOX 236 / BUFFALO, NY 14201

American history carries a wealth of stories that go largely unaddressed in our public consciousness, and in *Bright Advent* you explore a facet of Early American history that has nearly been forgotten, specifically the relationship between John Sassamon, a Massachusetts Indian who converted to Christianity, and the Puritan missionary John Eliot. (Sassamon assisted Eliot in translating the Bible for Native peoples.) Could you talk more about the subject of this book?

This is a book of poetry that makes use of archival material from the 17th-century Massachusetts Bay Colony, and my main interests with this project are translation and conversion, in many senses—of languages, of souls, of an entire landscape. The backdrop for the book is the translation of the Bible into the Algonquian language in the mid-1600s and the tensions around that project that contributed to the outbreak of King Philip's War in 1675. I went into this writing mostly interested in language and linguistics in the pressurized and violent century that forged the beginnings of "America," but the sum of the work certainly raises the issue of memory and the effacement of memory in the archives.



Archival research, particularly your work as part of your fellowship with the American Antiquarian Society, is the foundation of *Bright Advent*. Could you discuss how you approached your research for this project?

I was lucky to receive a Fellowship for Creative and Performing Artists and Writers at the American Antiquarian Society, which holds a good deal of relevant material in its archives, including one of the few surviving copies of the "Indian Bible." I conducted this research as a poet, rather than as a scholar. As I explain in the Afterword to *Bright Advent*, my method is to find the rich points of language in the archive—knowing full well that they are incomplete and biased—and to take the human and lyrical momentum of that historical seed farther down my own page.

The idea for the project emerged during an earlier research fellowship at the Massachusetts Historical Society. I stumbled upon the letters of the Puritan Rev. John Eliot, which I found stunning. Here was a man begging for money for his mission to "convert" the local Native Americans, and his highly eloquent letters to various bureaucracies are steeped with the greatest care and love for a group of people he believes he is saving from damnation—and yet he is actually the key actor in an act of genocide. His 17th-century language is stunning, its contradictions heartbreaking, and the human horribleness it precipitated is both utterly remote to us today and, unfortunately, completely familiar. As I read the words of John Eliot, it seemed that everything was about translation: from one language to another, from one spiritual state to another, from one landowner to another. Everything was being forced to change states, to approximate itself—and in the end it was all soaked in blood. And so much was erased. And then I learned that Eliot depended heavily on the work of Native American translators.

Could you talk more specifically about the historical figure of this Native American translator in your book?

John Sassamon, Eliot's main translator and his twin protagonist in *Bright Advent*, was an orphan who seems to have learned English as a servant in an English home, where Eliot probably stumbled upon him. Sassamon ended up going to Harvard, translating the entire Bible with Eliot, and serving as a crucial and tragic intercultural mediator. He was a genius, it is clear to me. My early writing around Sassamon began to explore how he could arrive at the center of the most astounding feat of translation in the 17th century without all the book training and education Eliot had. What emerged in my imagination was a gift Sassamon had for "seeing" language, and translation, in the physicality of breath, speech, and air itself. (See the documentaries about Daniel Tammet, our contemporary math genius who "sees" numbers and calculations as swirls of color.)

Then I learned that the scientist Robert Boyle served as the president of the Corporation for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England (the main funding agency for Eliot's mission and translation work). Among Boyle's many works (we know him best for his Law of Gases) is the posthumous collection of his ongoing investigation, *A General History of Air*. This stunning connection between a historical fact—Boyle's experiments on the properties of air—and my imagined cause for another historical fact—John Sassamon's gift for translating "in the air"—illustrates the serendipity of creative research. Poets often find that historical and imagined material stitch together with uncanny, synergistic ease to reveal "truths," in sum, that are greater than their parts.

Poetry is an unusual medium to explore history, but as your book demonstrates, the capacities of form and imagination allow for possibilities not available in traditional prose. How do you think your chosen genre allows *Bright Advent* to tell a different story than the one we might find in a traditional nonfiction account of the same events? Is your goal something quite different than historical accuracy?

Well, even the idea of "historical accuracy," looking back across four hundred years with only the archives left by the English to tell the story, is a bit of a problem. *Bright Advent* does not deviate from the historical "record" as far as events are concerned, but it does—necessarily—imagine a great deal about human interaction, particularly where the Native population and women, even English women, are concerned. The voices of these people, unfortunately, are largely missing from the archive. But even their empty spaces are profound and rich; they include whole human experiences of struggle and accomplishment.

Appropriation of Native American experience—or any experience not your own—is a tricky business that requires a lot of respect for your subject, and *Bright Advent* does this both through its diligent research and a careful rendering of the history. How does your placement in the world—both as a contemporary American citizen in the 21st century and as a white male—shape the way you approached this work?

This book is certainly not an attempt to inhabit or describe Native American culture in the 17th century. I could never write such a book. This book is about language, translation, conversion, violence, and the incredibly pressurized environment those things passed through when what came to be the eastern edge of the United States of America was being overrun by English Puritans. And at the center of the action was this astounding Algonquian man, John Sassamon. He went to Harvard, he translated for Eliot, he was tremendously influential across many cultural divides—as I read about this man and all the work he did, it seemed pretty clear that he was some sort of genius. I can't presume to speak for Algonquian culture of the 17th century any more than I could for the Puritan culture, but I do understand language and what it carries. And when it carries death and fear and love and striving—and when poetry allows it to carry those things farther than the archives have allowed—any person can understand it. For me, this book is about language as a tool and weapon, but I suppose the culture it is describing is the beginning of the Big American Mess.

The "Big American Mess"? Can you talk about this more?

A couple of examples from real lives. First: Many people in this country celebrate a thing they call "Thanksgiving," which is ostensibly based on the sachem Massasoit's feast visit with the Pilgrims in Plymouth. But contemporary Americans at Thanksgiving celebrations don't seem aware that the head of Massasoit's son, King Philip (Metacom), ended up on a pike in Plymouth. And that his wife and son were sold, by the Puritans, into slavery in the Caribbean.

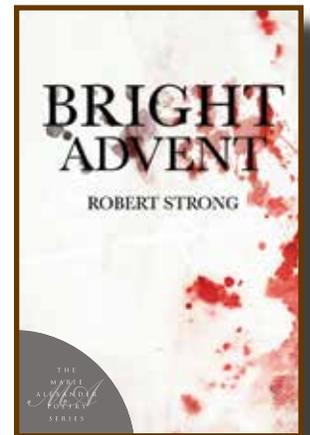
Second: As a young boy, I grew up playing and exploring in the waters of Saugatuck arbor on Long Island Sound, most often on the uninhabited Cockenoe Island. It wasn't until I was conducting the research for *Bright Advent* that I learned that Cockenoe was a man, another 17th-century Indian translator who very likely crossed paths with Sassamon, and that the island was named for him when he lived there brokering a land deed between Natives and English in Norwalk, Connecticut. In the 19th century the island was the site of a working farm—including a bootleg distillery which was raided by the Federal Government in 1870. In 1967, the United Illuminating Company was thwarted in its proposal to build a nuclear power plant on Cockenoe Island. In the Big American Mess, even on a few empty acres of sandbar, just as in the annals of history, there is no end to the hidden layering and erasing of languages and peoples and dangerous projects of America since English arrived. I used to go out to that island to be alone with my thoughts and the water's edge—just a kid exploring, both rapt and oblivious.

It's all very dark, and it is also all astounding and bright. To think of it: The entire Bible translated and printed, in the cold muck of 1650s Cambridge, Massachusetts, by an Indian translator who was using his genius to survive the collision of multiple peoples and a Puritan minister who truly believed his missionary work would hasten the second coming of Christ!

The force of will and linguistic genius of these two men, who could not have avoided becoming good friends of some sort, is an amazing thing to consider. Not to mention the work and support of the women around them, which we, as human beings, know was happening. And then there is this: Sassamon's work with Eliot is the main source of language for the current efforts of the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project in Mashpee, Massachusetts. The founder of this effort, Jessie Little Doe Baird, was awarded a MacArthur "Genius" grant for her organization's work to reclaim the Wampanoag language. That linguistic and cultural link, one that was underground for so many generations and now flourishes, is also a hopeful part of the American mess.

For twenty years now, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series has been dedicated to the appreciation and enjoyment of American prose poetry, and within the last few years, we have been looking for collections of flash fiction, short lyric essays, and other hybrid forms. *Bright Advent*, of course, absolutely fits into just what we were looking for, but it's written in a way that is deliciously difficult to define. How would you describe its genre?

People, all of us, hold a lot of unconscious assumptions about American history. By taking the linguistic seeds of that history from the archives and letting them grow, letting them follow their own emotional and human trajectories on the page, I hope to put those assumptions into play—or perhaps to run right past them. We also hold lots of unconscious assumptions about genre and about certain formal structures on the page. Readers of *Bright Advent* are often delighted (or dismayed) that a passage of archival material has transitioned into "poetry writing" without them noticing the boundary. They've missed the single quote that marked that transition, and I'm glad that they did—I don't want a boundary. I don't want readers dividing and ordering the words that invented history from the words that invent this book. When we think that the archive is the "real" voice of history, then we relinquish the authority of our own human imaginations and emotions—which know far greater truths about suffering and love and the taste of thin broth in a hungry, feverish mouth. So, yes, this is a hybrid form, but one that does not seek to highlight its stitchings and reconnaissance along the borders of recorded language and authority—just the opposite.



Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press since 2001, the Series publishes one to two books annually. These are typically single-author collections of short prose pieces, sometimes interwoven with lineated sections, and an occasional anthology demonstrating the broader literary context within which American poetry exists.

It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.

***Bright Advent* is our twenty-first volume.**

**PUB DATE: FEBRUARY 2017 / TRIM: 6 X 9 / POETRY/CREATIVE NONFICTION/HISTORY
ISBN (TRADE PAPER): 978-1-945680-04-5 / \$16.00**

**FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION OR TO REQUEST A REVIEW COPY, CONTACT:
NICKOLE BROWN, EDITOR OF THE MARIE ALEXANDER POETRY SERIES, NICKOLEBROWN1@GMAIL.COM**

**DISTRIBUTED TO THE TRADE BY:
CONSORTIUM BOOK SALES & DISTRIBUTION / 1.800.283.3572 / ORDERENTRY@PERSEUSBOOKS.COM**