



Expat Poet Finds Inspiration in 'PC Bang'

By Bridget O'Brien
Staff Reporter

An Australian poet-in-residence in Seoul has made it his mission to make smoky, noisy computer rooms known as "PC bang" his muse.

"Before I used to write more majestic, dreamlike stuff, not about real people or real things, but about the wild Jack Russell who lived in the moon, or about a girl waiting for Bruce Springsteen to turn up," explained the poet David Prater over wood-fired pizza and a glass of Guinness, during a cozy escape from Seoul's winter reality.



Australian poet David Prater takes time out from his busy "PC bang" schedule for a photo shoot with The Korea Times.
/Korea Times Photo by Kim Hyun-tae

Over the course of two months Prater has visited a different PC bang in Seoul every day and wrote about an "imaginary city" in each one. As he says, PC bangs are imaginary places: Business people go there to shoot aliens, gamble and check out Cyworld homepages.

His project was initially influenced by Italo Calvino's book "Invisible Cities," in which Marco Polo described a series of fictional cities (all of which were really Venice) to the Emperor Kublai Khan.

"For me this book, with its meeting of East and West, says a lot about the Western imagination and how it projects its own view of the world upon 'the other,' whether this be Asia or any other alien place. So, instead of writing about invisible cities, I decided to write about imaginary cities."

After drawing up a list of words in English ending with "city" ("tenacity," "audacity," "ferocity") and removed the letters "city" from each word, he created new cities — hence, "tena," "auda," "fero." Here, the idea of the city is both imaginary and invisible, where he can randomly write his personal impressions of Seoul such as this section from "Loqua-"

"City of garrets and all-night nature rants. City of the invisible line between smoking and non-smoking areas, waves of smoke billowing freely across this demilitarized zone while observers from both sides woman their monitors. City of freak scenes and bad acne, too much foundation and red blood dripping from the lip. City of faux-soundtracks to eighties jazz biopics shot in sepia-green. City of corn investigations, acid-rash and delta dreams."

Prater, 33, is here on a three-month residency, funded by the Australia-Korea Foundation and the Australia Council for the Arts, to write poetry and teach creative writing and Australian culture at Sogang University.

In Melbourne, he has been the editor of the online journal Cordite for the past five years, lifting it from its origins as a print publication to an online one, which has had to battle an attitude in the mainstream Australian literature scene that is unwilling to connect publishing to up-to-date

technology.

`` As an Australian, I am amazed and confused by young peoples' and old peoples' adoption of mobile phones, Cyworld homepages and DMB here in Korea.

`` I am constantly confronted by peoples' use of these technologies in public spaces _ the young woman talking on her phone blocking a line of people trying to get out of a subway station, an old man shouting on a mobile phone on the street, or a young couple watching TV together on a bus _ these things are part of a future world for me, and it has been both surreal and revealing to see this kind of promiscuous consumption here in Korea."

Prater also spoke about regretting not having gained an understanding of the deeper cultural aspects or learning enough Korean. In his poem, `` The Hanok Fields," he speculates, `` There's another country buried here/ in the ground under all this snow."

The young poet is grateful to Brother Anthony (An Sonjae) at Sogang University for introducing him to the Korean poet Ko Un. `` It seems he looms large over any discussion of Korean poetry and history over the past 50 years.

`` Ko Un's poetry reminds me in some ways of indigenous poetry in Australia, in its use of the plural `we,' and it's speaking for a generation of people.

`` Reading his work I am humbled, and it has caused me to reflect upon who I am speaking for in my own poetry, and to what ends I am writing poetry.

Prater could do that, but he could also continue making some cheering gregarious rants for all such as his rice wine-inspired `` makkolli" moon: `` Underneath the makkolli moon/ We'll pretend we never existed/ Smile at liquid breaths of dawn/ Edit our own white footprints."

For more of Prater's poems you can check out his online blog <http://pcbangs.blogspot.com/>

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