



Barber brings back Brautigan

by Sean Reynolds

John F. Barber teaches digital technology and culture at Washington State University-Vancouver. He has assembled a collection of essays entitled *Richard Brautigan: Essays on the Writings And Life*. Many of the thirty-two articles are from people who knew Richard Brautigan personally or professionally. Scheduled for release in the Fall, the book that chronicles the late author's life will also include previously unpublished photographs and artwork.

The last novel of Richard Brautigan, *An Unfortunate Woman*, was published posthumously by his daughter, Ianthe. It is a sublimely humorous, melancholy bramble of short chapters that the narrator describes as "one person's journey, a sort of freefall calendar map." It is a calling card, a self-appraisal of the author's life while communicating his tilted visions of traveling across the US in the early eighties, unwinding at his home in Montana, and ruminating over an apartment in Berkley where an unfortunate woman had hanged herself.

Endemic of Brautigan's extraordinary style of unique fabrication and extreme metaphor, the book is as genuine and honest as his other writings, with all the components of his best work. We are approaching the anniversary of Brautigan's own unfortunate late-summer suicide. Americans have appreciated his poems and novels for more than forty years. Every day, there are new readers who discover the bold, dark humorist for the first time, and many want to be in touch with the Brautigan conversation. One person has made an earnest goal of continuing the discussion of the artist's work.

John Barber was a former student and personal friend of the late novelist. His previous book, *Richard Brautigan: An Annotated Bibliography*, is an extensive journal

of chronology and criticisms. His website, *Brautigan Bibliography and Archive*, www.brautigan.net is the definitive online resource for the author's work. Says Barber, "The website allowed me to experiment with a new type of scholarship. Instead of going to dusty libraries and sifting among the boxes of unknown material, then hoarding what you have discovered until you can publish it years later, I wanted to experiment with the idea of making my research immediately available for scholarship or interested readers, and the World Wide Web seemed to offer that ability." Barber continued, "So, I shifted my focus and decided to become a developer, a creator, and a curator of an online entity, and that's how the archive site began. We get an average of 400 hits daily from around the world."



Photo by John F. Barber

Barber was a creative writing student when Brautigan was finishing his last novel. "He was writing *An Unfortunate Woman*, and I spent quite a bit of time with him during that period in Montana. It was the summer of 1982, and he died in September of 1984. Richard was writing about one of the predominant themes in his life—and that is death. I think we can trace that theme all the

way back to his high school days in Eugene, Oregon; to his fascination with Emily Dickinson."

Barber is the perfect choice as the mediator of the Brautigan discussion. He cares for the author's work with the magnifying glass of academia and the shot glass of an old friend. Reminiscing, he says, "Richard thought the Eagles Nest was the best bar in Montana, especially because he was the only guest they would allow to run a tab. It was what he called the 'Great American good time.'"

Barber looks ahead to the next conversation. E