

# Behind the Sestina: Alex J. Tunney on The Incredible Sestina Anthology and on “The Long Hot Summer Sestina”

Posted on [December 7, 2013](#) by [Alexandra Korcz](#) | [1 Comment](#)

As most people who read these “Behind The Sestina” interviews know, we usually interview poets who are featured in *The Incredible Sestina Anthology*. While [Alex J. Tunney](#) isn’t featured in the book, he played a large role in its construction. As an undergraduate intern at The College of Saint Rose, Alex was there with [Daniel Nester](#) at the inception of this idea and the two have spiraled into madness together for several years.



We went Behind *The Incredible Sestina Anthology* with Tunney to talk about working on *The Incredible Sestina Anthology*, and to talk about his own sestina, “The Long Hot Summer Sestina,” that was inspired by the anthology.

## What was your role in *The Incredible Sestina Anthology*?

I was one of the first editorial assistants working on the project way back in the summer of 2007 when it was still a project. I proofread, contacted poets, journals and presses for permissions and did some general office stuff like mailing and logging the projects process. Recently, I did some interviews and posts for the blog.

## So this was during the “Long Hot Summer” from your sestina’s title?

That’s right.

## What did you expect when you heard about an entire book just of sestinas?

Honestly, I don’t remember. I believe I did know about Nester’s work maintaining the [sestina section at McSweeney’s](#), so doing something with all those sestinas must have made sense to me. I think I was just excited to be working on something that got me connected to the literary world at large outside of school.

**Have you seen the finished product? Did it meet your expectations?** I actually bought a copy at [Greenlight Bookstore in Fort Greene](#) on a whim. I wanted to see if they would have it and, of course, they did. I just had to have it in my hands [*you’re also getting a free copy in the mail soon, Alex! ed*].

The cover looks great! My only real expectation was that the anthology get published. Anything else is just icing on the cake.

## Do you have a favorite sestina from the book? A favorite sestina poet?

For my favorite poem, I’ll go with Laura Cronk’s “Sestina for a Sister.” The nature of the structure of the sestina allows for a focus on things and ideas and this poem illustrates that very well. She’s able to render a great story because of the *repetitions* force readers to certain words and objects.

For favorite sestina poet, I’ll go with David Trinidad. “Playing with Dolls” reminds me of my childhood, and “Detective Notes” references Clue and is also a brilliantly constructed sestina.

## When did you first discover the sestina?

I probably discovered it while I started working on this project that summer. If not then, it was probably during a class taught by Nester the semester prior to the “long hot” summer.

## During this sestina project you were inspired to write your own sestina, “The Long Hot Summer.” What can you tell me about this sestina?

I wouldn’t say it was “inspired” so much as it was assigned to me by [Barbara Ungar](#), in the poetry class I had with her that fall semester after the eponymous summer. A sestina about a sestina anthology? I couldn’t pass that up. Of course, my life had managed to seep into the piece eventually, something I don’t think I could have avoided.

I remember hating this sestina immediately after writing it, especially the last line. It's not Elizabeth Bishop's "(write it!)" as it is a Marx Brothers' punch line. I still have my issues with it. Having written about this summer twice—during the summer itself and recently for grad school—I know that I avoided from going further into what happened during the summer and I think the poem suffers because of that.

Having said that, I also tend to take myself too seriously and am perpetually embarrassed by my past self, so take that last reason with a grain of salt.

I do like things about this sestina. I love the flexibility the word "really" has throughout. I also like that the repetition of the form relates to the focus that comes with reading and, well, love.

**Had you written any sestinas before (and have you written any since)?**

No, I haven't and I haven't written any since. I tend not to write poetry because prose (mostly nonfiction) is the format in which I feel I can best express my thoughts and feelings. When I attempt to write poetry it tends to turn into prose with line breaks. That said, I am very tempted to revise/update/salvage this sestina.

**You know as well as I do, first sestinas are always dedicated to someone. Who would you like to dedicate this sestina to?**

It would be obvious to say Nester, wouldn't it? But, I will dedicate it to him. I owe a lot to him.

I also want to dedicate to an additional three professors I had at The College of Saint Rose who were essential to my development as a writer. First is Dr. Ungar, who made me realize it was just as important to have a sense of humor about myself as it was to take myself seriously. Next would Kim Middleton who fostered my love of examining pop culture and gave me the tools to do it well. Last but not least is Cailin Brown of the Communications department, who advised me while I worked on The Chronicle newspaper and taught me not only how to look for the truth, but the importance of how it is presented to readers once it is found.

**The Long Hot Summer Sestina**

So I was editing a professor's sestina reader  
up in Albany this past summer.  
But while I scanned each and every line,  
my mind was stuck on unrequited love,  
and why the hell this city was so damn hot.  
I mean, who lives up here. Really.

But I wasn't complaining—too much. Really,  
I didn't mind being this kind of reader,  
I plan on going into editing. But, wow, was it hot.  
That and everybody had disappeared last summer.  
So, only a few distracted me from love.  
Those few people and each and every line.

With sestinas, the spiral goes deeper with each line.  
There's a Donald Hall sestina about this. It's really  
great for what I'm talking about. Like love,  
with each and every line, it draws the reader  
in. You can tell I didn't have much to do that summer;  
the classes were easy and the days were hot.

"Hot and boring, or perhaps boring and hot,"  
I would argue with myself while online.  
I was missing my Long Island summers,  
but I knew that I had to be here, really.  
So I decided to become a serious reader.  
Reading books you're supposed to read, if not love.

I wanted to be Mr. Darcy and read stories about love.  
Read *The Tale of Two Cities*. It wasn't too hot,  
but you choose books you don't like as a reader.  
*Everything is Illuminated* got me with each line.  
One of my favorite novels, it's beautiful, really.  
I had these pages to keep me company last summer,

which was good, because it was my longest summer.  
I had to learn what it meant to actually be in love.  
And I'm not sure I was. I wish I knew what it really  
was. It shouldn't be hell. Or Albany, equally as hot.  
Not hanging on a person's words or on each line,  
forcing yourself to become something of a mind reader.

That's the lesson, really, don't waste your summer.  
But luckily, instead of being love, I became I reader.  
(However, if you're hot— maybe you could drop me a line?)

—Interview conducted by Alexandra Korcz