

Spotlight: *We're pleased to present...*

Kevin M. Mitchell



Author, Playwright, Humorist

Lecture:

"Deadly Serious: The Craft of Being Funny on the Page"

Thursday, May 15, 2008, 7 to 8 pm

at Barnes & Noble-Ladue, 8871 Ladue Road, Ladue 63124

Get [map and directions](#). For lecture details, visit our Calendar page.

All are welcome. No charge to attend.

Please [register in advance](#)

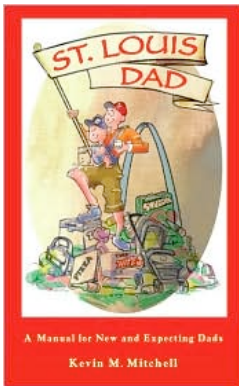
and you could win our attendance prize drawing.

(You must be present to win.)

KEVIN M. MITCHELL grew up in South County (Lindbergh, class of '81) and moved to Kansas City, where he graduated from the University of Missouri—Kansas City

Conservatory of Music. As managing editor for the campus paper, he wrote a great deal of humor pieces. This led him to the hilarious position as obituary writer for the *Kansas City Star*. He moved to Los Angeles and worked at the Groundlings Improv Theater, which staged a comedy he wrote. Through the theater he also wrote and performed music for comedy shows by such then-Groundlings performers as Will Ferrell, Jane Lynch, and Kathy Griffin. For a decade KEVIN wrote six screenplays and about 20 sitcom scripts, mostly to no avail (though he did sell one pilot and saw another one produced). Meanwhile, he also saw his books published and musical comedies produced. In 2001 he moved back to St. Louis, working as a freelance writer mostly for magazines, including *St. Louis Magazine*. In 2007 his kids' musical comedy, *Beanstalk! The Musical!* was produced in Webster Groves. His two most recently published books are *The Musician's Ultimate Joke Book*, distributed by Hal Leonard, and *St. Louis Dad*, published by Reedy Press. KEVIN loves writing about himself in the third person almost as much as he loves his wife, Lauren, sons Owen and Beckett, and dog Lucy Bloomer. He lives in Webster Groves, Missouri.

Check out *St. Louis Dad*:



Publisher: Reedy Press
ISBN-13: 9781933370149
Pub. Date: September 2007
Pages: 196

Read the [Foreword from *St. Louis Dad*](#).

An Interview conducted by St. Louis Writers Guild with **KEVIN M. MITCHELL...** (Copyright 2008 St. Louis Writers Guild)

SLWG: Where are you from originally?

KM: South County (St. Louis, MO).

SLWG: How has your environment/upbringing colored your writing?

KM: I grew up Irish Catholic in St. Louis, could be without being completely screwed up. At least that's my story and I'm sticking to it. There was a good amount of humor and music in my family, and I grew up in a great neighborhood. I was the way youngest, born to a Mom who was at the ancient age of 35 in 1962 when she begat me. I was overweight, talked funny (speech problem), and was terrible at sports, which for a St. Louis kid, is an unpardonable crime. I figured out I need to try to be funny or wouldn't have a chance.

SLWG: When and why did you begin writing?

KM: I'm not sure. I remember being in third grade we all had to write a story and the teacher had me read mine in front of the class. Everybody laughed all the way through it. I don't even remember what it was about. I think an elephant was involved. It probably farted. That always gets a big laugh from the under ten sector. Then hijinks ensued. Anyway, I remember liking that feeling, and per the previous answer, it was not too hard to understand for a kid who wasn't very popular.

SLWG: When did you first consider yourself a writer?

KM: When I wrote my first book--a tiny non-fiction thing. I called home (I was living in LA at the time) and told my dad that I was getting a book published. He asked me how much it was going to cost me to publish it. He didn't get it. Then again, I had spent 13 years sleeping on various floors in various cities and I was calling him from a pay phone. Collect. Anyway, when my first book came out I DID NOT send it to him. I made him go to the damn book store, and BUY a copy with his own money. I wanted him to get it. He did, and that's when I was like, hey wait a minute ... maybe I *am* a writer.

SLWG: Who or what inspired you to pen your first book or major work?

KM: I read Mark Twain and became crazy about how he was able to write like people talk. So many books are too formal for my taste, and when someone can do that, it really touches me. Now, I'll never rise to Twain's level, but that was the starting point for me. Maybe it's the musician in me, but I do have a good ear for dialog. I like stories when I feel like the author is across the table talking to me like a regular Joe or Jane.

SLWG: How long did it take you to complete your latest work, *St. Louis Dad*—from idea to acceptance by a publisher?

KM: My wife getting knocked up helped. But let's assume, for the sake of this interview, I had something to do with that process. When I was victim to the huge amount of books for women about being pregnant, I saw a need, a need for a short, funny book that relayed the details that a guy needs to know. Then my publisher, Reedy Press (their people) added the St. Louis angle and it all hit home. I would write one or two witty paragraphs a week at the Starbucks in Webster. But alas, there are only two great moments in a writer's life: a publisher saying, "Yes, we'll publish that," and the cashing of the royalty check. Everything in between *suuucks*. For example, actual writing is involved. I had to crank it out over a few short months. They were great, Reedy, but yeah - I feel like I wrote 90% of it in like two months.

SLWG: How long did it take for you to actually hold the published work in your hands—from acceptance by the publisher to release of the final product? Was it worth it?

KM: Funny thing about that. First of all, I make my living writing --every month I have to crank out crap for various magazines. As soon as I invoice for a piece, it's dead to me. I've literally gotten magazines I write for and started reading an article and been like—"Man, this sucks --what a weak lead. That was a bad transition. What, is this guy

trying to be funny? What a jerk!" Then looked up and saw my own byline on it. So I'm not a fan of my work from the get-go.

Meanwhile, you don't see a dime on a book you write for like three years, from the time you turn it into a publisher--as far as the idea—that's five, ten years. *St. Louis Dad* started out fun, then it was like *jeez*, deadline, gotta crank this out with all my other writing ... Then it was dead to me. What seemed like eight years later, the owners of Reedy Press showed up at my doorstep, all smiles, with a copy of some book they say I wrote.

(Naturally, I did not let them in and called the police. I suggest you do the same should it happen to you. ☺)

So for me it's a weird process, but yes, it is worth it. I suppose it's worth it. Can I have my accountant field this one?

SLWG: Please describe the research process that goes into the writing of your work.

KM: It's a living thing. I'm always saying to people that I'm never really working and never really NOT working at the same time. I feel I fumble through my time at the computer but never turn it off either. It's not healthy. It's not uncommon for me to be at this computer at 5 in the morning and two in the morning. It's very a sedentary life. (Have I mentioned I weigh 720 pounds? I have ankles the size of melons.)

But I read constantly and retain a lot when I'm working on a project. I'm always listening to NPR, always reading, always googling.

In college, I studied music composition, and a professor there named Kemner had no patience for people who waited to be "inspired." Even when I don't feel like it, even if what I'm physically writing at a given moment is terrible and I know I will throw it out later, I still make myself do it.

SLWG: What advice can you offer authors who have finished a first book-length manuscript and now seek to market it to a publisher?

KM You're already off to a bad start. If you start something without a clear market in mind, a specific publisher or two, an ear to what they want or are interested in ... *man!* Yeah, the days of writing something you want to read and then trying to sell it are kinda over (if they ever existed at all). That's for the hobbyist and there's nothing wrong with that. Self-publishing is a great option for them. But if you're serious about selling what you write, you have to have a business plan. You need to write good query letters and create an organized proposal (and you do this before you finish the book).

SLWG: What advice can you offer an author who has sold a first book—with respect to working with an editor or negotiating the terms of the contract?

KM: It's a brave new world. Accept the reality that there are more of you, good talented smart writers able to produce books, then the market can accommodate. So I tell people: what's it worth to you? There are horror stories: there are good writers who simply let small publishers publish their work FOR FREE. It's criminal. The writer will say "it's a labor of love" but it devalues us all.

But here's a basic tip: if you're not getting 5% of the retail price in royalty, or more (and hopefully you're getting closer to 10%), you really should consider self-publishing and selling it out of the back of your car.

SLWG: Who, or what has most influenced your writing style, and in what way?

KM: Besides Twain, Garrison Keillor, Woody Allen, a touch of Dave Barry. Nick Horby most recently--God, what an ear for dialog that guy has! Otherwise good journalism, especially since I write more nonfiction than fiction; it's harder and harder to find, and you certainly find little of it here in St. Louis publications.

SLWG: What are your current writing projects?

KM: I'm currently working on an amazing grocery list. You'll laugh, you'll cry, but you'll remember to pick up the 2% milk at Schnucks.

SLWG: What are you reading now?

KM: Joyce Carol Oates *We Were the Mulvaney's*.

SLWG: How do your family and/or friends feel about your writing pursuits in general?

KM: I believe they all know me to be the fraud I am (I hang with a very classy, smart group). I constantly hear myself saying, "no really, I make a living writing - and, oh yeah, it's supplemented by my career as a jazz musician." Once they get through that considerable hoop, they don't bother to read the stuff I write or the music I make. But really, who can blame them? I don't read the stuff I write either.

SLWG: Do you regard your writing as a lifelong career?

KM: I suppose I am in bed with the writing thing.

SLWG: What is the one piece of advice you would give to someone who seeks to be a successful writer?

KM Understand, appreciate, and respect that it's a business. People are feeding families and sending kids to college based on their decisions about what to publish or not. Be grown up about it.

SLWG: If you had to do it all over again, would you change anything?

KM: I'd be taller.

SLWG: Tell us your latest news!

KM: I just finished some work for Disney Online I'm pretty proud of. I was head writer for their re-launching of the Playhouse Disney section. I wrote games, general copy, and even a short story involving Mickey and one game. It's all about inspiring little kids to get involved with music. I wrote a funny rhyming game, along with some general information for parents. Talk about my two vocations colliding ... anyway, it was pretty cool. That should be up in June or so.

SLWG: Is there anything we didn't ask that you would like to share?

KM: You didn't ask about my two amazing boys, Owen and Beckett. And you didn't ask if I routinely steal the candy they are given, which I do.

Also, you didn't ask if you could validate my parking ticket. I need validation. I am, after all, a writer.

Visit Kevin M. Mitchell's website: www.kevinmmitchell.com