

Since Bill is not going away, poet might as well write through him

By **B.T. SHAW** | SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Poet Robin Behn calls Dan Kaplan's first book, "Bill's Formal Complaint," "funny, crafty, wise, warm," and those adjectives, as his students at Portland State University can attest, also apply to the Portland poet himself.

The author of a bilingual chapbook, "SKIN," Kaplan also is a former editor of the *Black Warrior Review*. His work has appeared in many publications, including "Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories."

Recently he took a break from teaching and his work at the children's literacy organization SMART to answer a few questions by e-mail.

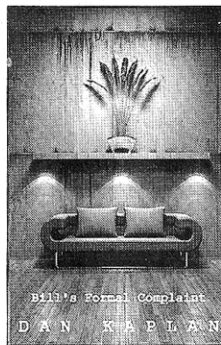
Q: So, who's Bill?

A: I'm not sure who he is, but I can unconvincingly say that he is not me. He first appeared about six years ago on a sheet of paper in Alabama, where I lived at the time. More than anything, he is a voice with a name attached to it, a voice that laments, rejoices, waxes, bemoans and fabricates. We know nothing of Bill that we often associate with identity — what he looks like, where he lives, what he does for a living.

Q: At what point did you realize he wasn't going to quietly go away, that you were building a

Poetry

**BILL'S
FORMAL COMPLAINT**
Dan Kaplan
The National Poetry
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\$17.95 paperback, 80 pages



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Dan Kaplan

book around him?

A: One of the first pieces I wrote for what would eventually become "Bill's Formal Complaint" is a prose poem titled "Bill." In it, the name "Bill" appears 24 times, the repetition, in and of itself, insisting on the character's existence, if only in the world of the poem. I wasn't convinced until about six months and 15 Bill poems later that he wasn't going away. I couldn't stop following him. Most poets (myself included) are, I think, obsessive to some degree.

Q: Definitely, though we sometimes don't recognize those obsessions during the writing. You also use the sonnet form. Why sonnets?

A: I'd been thinking about poet Robert Creeley's comment, "form is never more than an extension of content," and found myself interested in undercutting expectation, using the sonnet as a container for (among other things) an answering-machine message, bureaucratic missives, invented dictionary definitions and medical-diagram captions. The key was to make the music work while using unlikely subjects and discourses.

B.T. Shaw edits *The Oregonian's* poetry column.