

# Conversation with Cary Groner

## Photographer/writer talks about his craft, the media, nuclear war, and more

by Lucia McKelvey

What started to be a routine interview with a Eugene photographer quickly turned into something more interesting, and we've decided to run it all.

Cary Groner, we discovered, is far more than a local boy with his finger on the shutter. A recent arrival who actually lives in Cottage Grove, Groner is also a writer whose work has won awards and appeared in a variety of regional and national publications. He has written plays, screenplays, and fiction. He attended the drama conservatory at Carnegie-Mellon University as a directing student, and completed the four-year program, recognized as one of the most rigorous in the nation, in three years. Widely read, he has something to say about nearly everything.

We began the interview discussing his most recent coup, a second-place award in an international photographic competition sponsored by the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh.

**What's Happening:** What's the competition about?

**Groner:** It's for nature photography, essentially, which is one of the things I do. The picture they liked is of some really nice-looking fog coming through the old-growth forest over by Short Sands, on the coast.

**WH:** You sound a little unconvinced.

**CG:** Well, I must say that the first thing that came into my head when they called me was, "Gawd, they couldn't have gotten very good stuff!" I mean, it's an okay picture, but out of 500 some-odd entries? Come on...

**WH:** Modesty?

**CG:** Reality. Not that I'm complaining.

**WH:** You have something of a reputation of being an *enfant terrible*. Is there such a position as Eugene's foremost nature photographer?

**CG:** If there is, I doubt I'm it! It must be clear that Brian Lanker is Eugene's foremost everything photographer, and anyone who believes otherwise is

either an unrecognized genius of extraordinary magnitude or sadly deluded. I don't know about this reputation you mention; I assume you've been talking to one of my editors. Anyway, to be an *enfant terrible* I think you still need to be an *enfant*, which I'm not. Although as anyone who reads *Newsweek* knows, the title does confer a certain *je ne sais quois*, which in art circles these days is absolutely *de rigueur*. Really. *Par excellence*. *Au jus*. If people like us can't pepper our dialogue with useless French phrases, how will we ever make it in big-league New York journalism? Maybe I'll be content to be an *adulte terrible*, which I suppose is better than being a terrible adult.

**WH:** You're how old?

**CG:** 31.

**WH:** Was turning 30 traumatic for you?

**CG:** No, it was wonderful. It was like the dam broke. I was finally relieved of the potential of a being a child prodigy in anything.

**WH:** Was there ever any question that you were?

**CG:** No, but this made it official.

**WH:** How did you get into photography?

**CG:** I'd studied it a bit the first time I went to college, back when the dinosaurs roamed the earth. Then, when I got out of drama school and moved to Portland I discovered something interesting. A city the size of Portland could support dozens of commercial photographers, but do you know how many stage directors it could support? Zero. I suppose that if I could really make a living as anything in the best of all possible worlds, it would be as a stage director and playwright, but it's a moot point. So I started looking around. How can you make a decent living and not be bored to death? I did a lot of freelance writing in those days, but I was basically supporting myself as a house painter. Then, about three years ago, I took a few of my old pictures from college down to Kevin

Murphy at *Northwest Magazine*, and he was very encouraging. It didn't take me long to notice that when I sold them an article with photos, I was paid twice as much for the pictures as for the writing. And the pictures were a hell of a lot more fun. So that became a regular working relationship which has continued, and which has really given me a chance to educate myself.

**WH:** Photography is a competitive field. Have you had much other encouragement?

**CG:** Anybody who thinks photography is competitive should go out and try to make a living in the theatre for a while. What I have found is that people in photography, at least in this part of the country, are some of the loveliest people I've ever met. That in itself has been an encouragement. I've never run into anyone who wasn't willing to fall over backwards to give me some information on how to do something. I remember the first time I met Bruce Forster [a Portland commercial photographer.—Ed.] He was looking at these slides of mine, and he said, "Looks a little cool," meaning they were too blue. Well, at the time, I didn't know what he was talking about. I said, "Yeah, it was about 45 degrees that day." And he didn't bat an eye. Now *that* is a lovely human being!

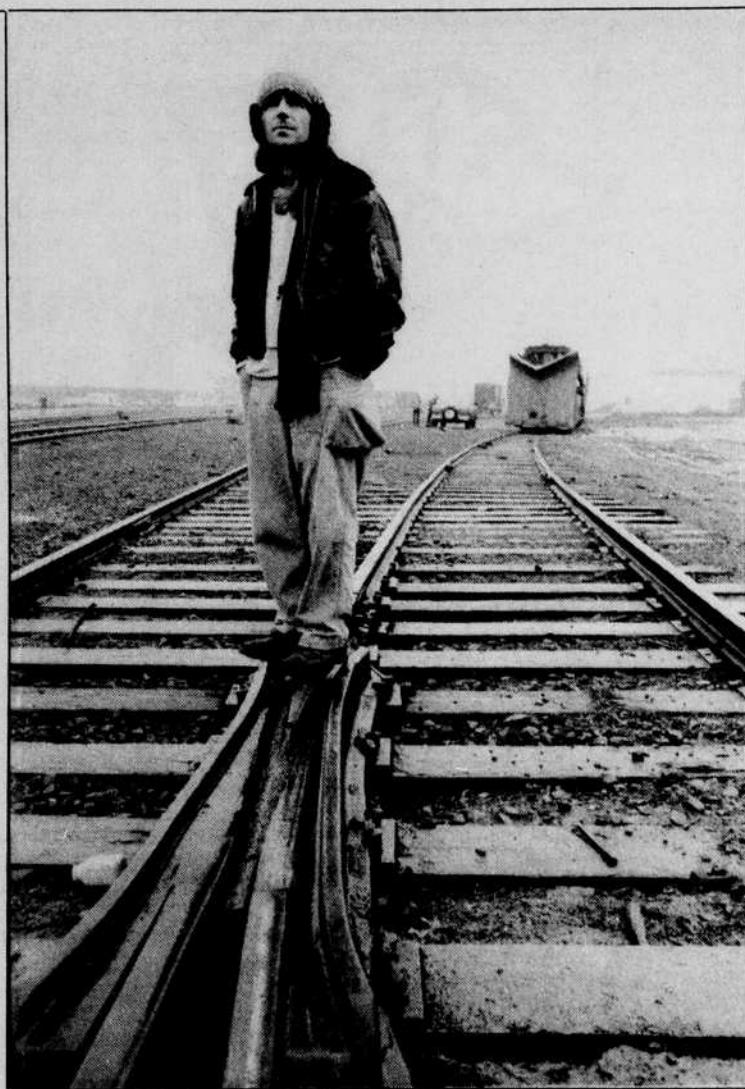
**WH:** Are you having much success in Eugene?

**CG:** I've really just started. I've been supporting myself largely with my writing since I moved here. I've finally put a commercial portfolio together, and I'm starting to make the rounds. The art directors I've met have been very nice, very encouraging.

**WH:** But no work?

**CG:** I'm sure as soon as word gets around that if I don't work my wonderful cat will starve to death, the phone will ring off the hook. Actually, I'm a little limited at the moment

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Photograph by Cary Groner

White Train Protester, Vancouver, Washington.

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Photograph by Cary Groner

Old Growth Forest near Short Sands, Oregon Coast. Second place winner in the Carnegie Museum of Natural History's international photographic competition.