

Self-Interview

I have a note from when I started my fifth novel, *Pirate Talk or Mermalade* in 1997: “Why this is only dialogue: history is a series of whispers. The landscapes change but the whispers continue.” While landing *Pirate Talk*, I kept having to justify *Why Only Dialogue*. Talk Like a Pirate Day had yet to be invented, and Philip Roth hadn’t run his all-dialogue story in the New Yorker. Thirty years ago, Chip McGrath at the New Yorker told me I did description well. With my usual perversity, I did without. Both for the fun of it, and because I love Daniel Defoe’s dialogue. People from another time in history differ in culture from ours, their world and language is closer to sci-fi than the contemporary. I wanted the reader to feel as if he were listening through some temporal fold that physics is always promising that would allow him to overhear voices in the 18th century. But really, contemporary life is all about dialogue now, tweets and blogs overwhelming the well-made prosaic.

Why do you continue to write when you don’t make any money on it?

I should stop and do something else and see if I still want to do it. But there’s a hurdle ahead, there’s always another hurdle, just one more. It’s fun. I don’t know what these fingers will put down. I don’t know what they’ll pull up. They seem to stick right out of my brain and my brain is in my wrists. Money seems like such a good reason but that would mean real courtship with an audience, I would have to love you, the reader, but I can’t. I love the writing.

Influences?

I’m reading all about Chris Marker, maker of singular film-essays. An image contains both the story and the viewer, both the reality of what you see and what you imagine, a kind of Keatsian dichotomy that my brain likes, with the held opposition being associational, between planes. What’s the story behind hate/love anyway? What hate does not contain love? They’re more related than polar. We’re always holding red and green next to each other—if we’re thinking. At the moment I’m in love with Alejo Carpentier, Renaldo Arenas, Mavis Gallant’s first book, Maile Meloy’s first book, Herta Muller, a lot of red and green.

Any life besides writing?

Is making videos not writing? I just finished one about marriage and terrorism. It took me three years to learn Final Cut Pro--I’m an impatient savage when it comes to tech. My husband has a phone that is the size of a slice of cheese that has only one hole—for making HD videos. I must say I like the magic of that, the necessity of imagination on the part of the user just to use it.

What about teaching?

Interviewers don't ask whether writers like teaching because they fear the answer. Nobody likes teaching. It takes so much time away from writing. Everybody loves students. The power structure is the closest the writer can come to having a regular audience, albeit faux, and a place to inflict his ideas directly. Most of the time students have too few ideas, which is unfortunate. The writer needs trouble.

How did you do all this writing?

I had a baby (three) and food stamps. I had hunger that went beyond the kitchen. I couldn't breathe if I typed other people's manuscripts all day. I never gave up although I was very discouraged, especially in the fifteen years it took to publish my first novel. I was maybe even more discouraged with the four-year gap between 2002 and 2006. But one can always give up, there's always time for that.

How did it feel to have poems published in the New Yorker, TLS and Poetry all in 2009?

I'm an overnight success—that was my third poem in the New Yorker in 25 years, the last poem I had in Poetry was 35 years ago, and the editor at TLS died immediately after my poem ran. Pretty dangerous stuff. As long as I live for another fifty years, I'll have obtained a certain four-generation notoriety, each time readers welcoming me as a new poet.

You've published four books in three years. Aren't you nervous about your next one?

Mais oui. When my sixth novel, *Bohemian Girl*, comes out from Bison Books fall 2011, I'm back on the street with everybody else. I'd love to be published by Europa Books. Are you listening, Europa?

Desires?

I wish somebody would tell me what I'm doing. I would find that interesting, like a trip to the fortune-teller's, more fun than the shrink's. Maybe I could do it better.