

# New Interview from Larry Abbott: Suzanne Rancourt on Poetry, Myth, Nature, Indigenous Life

Suzanne Rancourt's new book of poems, *Old Stones, New Roads* (2021) builds on the work of her two previous books (*Billboard in the Clouds*, 2014, and *murmurs at the gate*, 2019). She dedicates the book to her grandmother, Alice Pearl, "who told me stories of where each stone came from that she used to build the hearth at the camp on Porter Lake." The "old stones," the stories, link past to present, and are both literal and symbolic, representing not only one's personal past but also the psychological markers of family, relationships, art, history, culture, and heritage. In the same way that Alice's stones are laid and build, "braided," to create the hearth, Rancourt's poems create a braid of the natural world and the human world, memory and the present, and myth and history. The "old stones" are also the poems from her earlier work that create a pathway to the present and the future.



The first poem in the collection, "Tunkashila" (which means grandfather in Lakota), links the natural and human worlds. As a child, Rancourt "becomes" an eagle as she climbs a white pine, going further into the sky: "I climb to teetering ethers/I stretch as mist/along the silver thread thrown down from the heavens." As the poem ends she hears her mother and father calling her name, and "my grandfather/calling." The connection to nature is also revealed in "Cyclops Fermata." As Rancourt prays she observes the animals around her and recognizes a symbiotic relationship with them: "We listen to one another even when everyone goes silent/for the hawks who wait for me/to place fingers in my mouth and whistle back."

In "When the Air is Dry" from *Billboard in the Clouds* Rancourt writes "these memories are distant/yet as shadows leak through pine needles,/ . . .they continue to seep . . . through my mind/into my children's lives." Memories are not compartmentalized and bracketed, but bear, in both positive and negative ways, on the present. Memories of childhood experiences and family relationships go hand and hand with memories of trauma and loss. She develops this theme in "In My Mother In Me" from the new collection. She recalls some familial details about her mother, but more importantly shows how deeply her late mother's presence is embedded in her and the family: "You are in the bowl of consciousness everyone feeds from/at family dinners, birthdays, and wakes./You are in my heart and hand that grips the sword."

In one of the best poems from the new collection, "Ode to Olivia, Mumma, and Me," she develops similes based on personal memories to express recognition of the "jolting screech" of death: "ceased engines from pistons thrown/or the menacing zing of circular saws at Grampa's lumber mill/stopped solid by hardwood knots . . . ." At the same time she understands that "My dreams/Mum's dreams/are a place where this one moment/is all moments/an electric arc of connections . . . ."

Myth and place are also central to Rancourt's work, where ancient regions bear on the present. She locates some poems in Greece and weaves myth with her sensations and observations. In "Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay" she writes: "More ancient than these chiseled stones/spit forth from the annals of Khaos—I remember and return— . . . ."

Methana, a Greek town on a volcanic peninsula, holds special import. Poems such as "Leaving Methana" and "The Shores of Methana," where "A Poseidic wave draws love from my chest," use place to connect their ancient stones to new roads.

Similarly, in "Voyage," she imagines a return to primal beginnings: "I would slip across cold waters to warm shores/archetypical images of real lives, hardships

fossilized/in the caves of Innis nan Damh rumbling/in the hollow rib cage of the oldest known cave bear skeleton . . .  
" The imaginative memory takes her to Ullapool and Achadh Mealvaich and "braids me with the Norse Moors of Scotland."  
She ends:

*I would go there again as my ancestors  
Travel gulf stream waters to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia,  
Where the Red Paint people curled into the shape  
of an ear to earth we listen  
as our ochre painted bodies—our blood painted bodies  
return to life*

The poem is a way to show a reciprocal relationship with her ancestors. For Rancourt the myths and stories of Greece and Scotland shape her life in the same way that indigenous myths and stories shape that life. Rancourt, like Whitman, "contains multitudes." The interlaced braids of one's existence, Rancourt suggests, should not be unwound, for to do so would make a counterfeit of life. Her poems remind us that, as much as we might wish, we are not just "of today" but are the living legacy of the "braided stones" of our past and will become a "braided stone" for the future.





I discussed some of the poems with Rancourt. That conversation follows.

**LARRY ABBOTT:** What is the importance of Greece and Greek myths, like in the poems “Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay,” “The Shores of Methana,” and “Akhelios Comes to Shore”?

**SUZANNE RANCOURT:** Everything! My need to travel is about collecting all the parts of me while honoring all of my ancestors, experiences, and the sense that maybe this isn't the first time I've lived through these experiences. The poems you mentioned are layers of memories, experiences, and sensations that aligned in one moment of enlightenment and from that emerged the poems. For example, in “Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay,” there is a real, physical place that I go to in Greece, called Methana, for the natural volcanic, outdoor, sulfur baths. Methana is technically not an island, however, the land bridge is barely a two lane road. Thus, it holds its own identity which hails its support for Sparta – back in the day. There is this phenomenon referred to as “collective consciousness,” which can feel like a *deja vu* experience or a slight vibration or recognition that may not make sense but is quite real. Methana does that for me and by giving myself permission to bathe in this resonance, healing can occur in my recognizing a familiarity or kinship or existence or “I've been here before.” The Greek spelling of “Oya” is “Oia.” It is pronounced “EE-yaa.” It is this literal sound of the name that aligns, in a calibrating manner, cultures, my own lived experiences, metaphors, temperament, traits, and ancestors. My family has a history of lightning. My three military enlistments. Three marriages. The role and strong attributes of Oya (Santeria) in my contemporary life are significant. The cover of the new book is a photo of the altar at Acropolis Oya, which is a real place. As a writer, a witness, I gave myself permission to feel this place and its power. At times, overwhelming, but nonetheless what emerged were the alignments of emotions,

memories, and “aha” moments that as writer I crafted into this poem. First, the initial write to allow the synchronicity to emerge naturally, organically. Then, I allowed the poem to inspire and guide further research. War is as ancient as the beginning of time and thus warriors are equally ancient. And if war and warriors are as old as the beginning of time, so is PTSD, and so is the need for healing, and so is the migration to sacred springs and sulfur baths and to bathe in waters that Spartans had bathed, to walk to the Acropolis Oya to the altar stone and spring to overlook the bay, well, that’s pretty damn powerful.

In “The Shores of Methana” the tone and imagery create the in-between space where I, as a simple human being, am easing into the power of place. Wherever we travel, for whatever reason, a significant part of understanding history, people and culture, is “feeling” the environment, the power of place. It usually takes me a bit of time to “settle down” enough to ease into to place. Listening to the space, employing spidey senses, or dowsing – whatever you choose to call it – is step one. Giving yourself permission to acknowledge any recollections, memories, while taking note, literally, where in your body you feel this is significant. Self- forgiveness is a biggie in my world, and in the world of survivors’ guilt along with the “should’a, could’a would’a” shit. Healing takes time – lifetimes.

Regarding “Akhelios Comes to Shore,” on trans-Atlantic flights I always carry a small journal with me. I simply free write. I take note of sights, sounds, smells, gestures. It is good practice, in general, leading to spatial awareness, situational awareness. Later, I’ll go back and see what emerges. There is a lot of truth in the world of absurdity because truth can definitely be absurd. I gave myself permission to honor the tone of this poem’s narrator. The poem was inspired by a real person on a very long trans-Atlantic flight. I let the poem sit for a bit and then out of

curiosity I wanted to know if there was a Greek deity that was a shark. And guess what I found? Akhelios. And guess what? People make billions off wars.

**LARRY ABOIT:** "Ode to Olivia, Mumma, and Me" is one of the best poems, with strong similes. There is a merging or weaving of past and present: "this one moment/is all moments." Can you discuss the poem?

**SUZANNE RANCOURT:** Time, and its concept, isn't just a singular, linear event. Perhaps for folks whose vagal system has not been awakened by threats of death and other trauma intensities that flip sensory systems on, or people who have not experienced death in what some refer to as Near Death Experiences (NDE), perhaps life is one-dimensional. For those who have experienced the scenarios previously mentioned, "time" and "life" are multi-dimensional with layers of events occurring synchronistically. Western medicine, for the most part, doesn't acknowledge this perspective. My Indigenous, cultural perspective, elders, and traditional ceremonies do. So did Einstein. The line you sight is a line describing the moment where a calibration clicks in. These moments can be disconcerting. They are fleeting and an individual can begin to "chase them." Don't do that as the present moment is gone. Instead, acknowledge, to the best of your ability, in a mindful manner, to the best of your ability, what that "aha" sensation literally felt like in your body. Focus on that for a moment. This poem was indeed inspired by the dream described in the poem. This is a non-fiction poem. In my culture, dreams are powerful. Write them, sing them, dance them, paint them – people need your art, need to hear that their experiences are not isolated. Remember – lifetimes of wars equal lifetimes of warriors equal lifetimes of PTSD, grief, comradeships, unified purpose, service, loss, moral dilemmas and needs for healing. Pay it forward by sharing your experiences in an honest manner. Be authentic. Be yourself.



**LARRY ABBOTT:** In “Voyage” what is the Scottish and Red Paint People connection?

**SUZANNE RANCOURT:** This poem is another true-events-and-facts poem where in my travels I am not only honoring all of my ancestors, but in so doing I am regrouping the scattered fragments of my identity, humanness, and personhood. The poem addresses the synchronicity of overlaid time and events. Again, some of these natural experiences can be disconcerting. However, the Northwest Highlands are naturally mystical and that’s where I actually was, physically hiking the land. This poem speaks of my ancestors and tribal clans from Scotland. Keep in mind, that the waters of the Northwest Coast, Scotland, are Gulf Stream currents that carried ancient peoples back and forth all the way into Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Maine. Their use of ochre in burial rituals is also connected to the constellation Cygnus, as well as the Milky Way. Seafarers were keenly knowledgeable in the areas of navigation by stars. A voyage can be lifetimes. All my ancestors are of warrior class. Navigating the home journey can be rough. For me, understanding where I come from clarifies my forward motion. I am never alone and my ancestors are always present.

**LARRY ABBOTT:** What are the “humming strands of DNA” in “When Your G String Breaks”? Native and European heritage? Any other poems along these lines?

**SUZANNE RANCOURT:** The Vibration Principle. Quantum Physics. Hair carries DNA. Among Indigenous people hair is especially sacred and is only cut in rare circumstances. It has always been, and continues to be taught, that hair connects us to our ancestors and that long hair is special. I was prohibited from cutting my hair in Basic Training, MCRD, Parris Island. I’m grateful for that. This poem was inspired by my actually needing to change the strings on my 12 string guitar because, yes, the G-string broke. Literally, the strings looked like long hair draping over the body. I gave myself permission to

use all of my senses, to feel, remember, and to simply free write. This poem was not written in one session. I would let it season and then go back in to further explore, do more free writing, even when the surprises surfaced. Because the guitar is a vibrational instrument, the metaphors emerged naturally. As a writer, I researched various science fields for language that fit both the concrete and abstract metaphorical aspects. DNA is a code in the most microchip data concept imaginable. It is an ID, a tracking device, storing our personal history record; constructed to make certain we don't truly lose ourselves; every single cell of our physical body carries this information. Our bodies remember everything, and whether we cognitively acknowledge those memories or not, our bodies do. Thus, being in places, doing particular things, "awakens" memories. For healing purposes, where we go, what we do, and with whom we travel, matters. There are some places I have an aversion to.

**LARRY ABBOTT:** What is the importance of these specific places, like in "In the Regions of High Metamorphism"?

**SUZANNE RANCOURT:** First off, I found the similarity between amygdaloidal and amygdala fascinating. One references the geological phenomenon creating vesicles that form in igneous rock, or cooled lava, and the latter, references the almond-shaped part of the brain significant in regulating fight, flight, or freeze emotions and survival responses. Of course, metamorphism is changing the shape of things. I had to travel far from certain environments to change something, to heal something, to appreciate something. For me, to set out of chaotic conditions, I was drawn to Methana. I stood inside a volcano's lava tube. I gave myself permission to feel with my body, to receive a vibration, perhaps, to give myself permission to live, to heal, to receive life while honoring who and what I am as a human being. High Metamorphism.

**LARRY ABBOTT:** "Swan Dive" a concrete poem. I don't recall you've done others like this.

**SUZANNE RANCOURT:** I mentioned the constellation, Cygnus, also known as the Northern Cross, earlier. It is significant for navigation. This poem also asked of me as a writer to have a shape. It is a poem about letting go of the various types of control that keep memory doors shut, compartmentalized and finally, feeling safe enough to open them. We white-knuckle our shit as though we're the only ones who have had certain experiences and while no two people have the identical experience, it is also true that as human beings we can relate through emotional context. For example, most humans have lost a loved one to death. We can find areas of common emotional experience when we are honest with ourselves. This takes courage and often times, proper support. This poem for me is a type of resolution that finally I feel I have explored all my nooks and crannies of shit and, finally, I'm o.k. with knowing where I've been because I'm here now. Something about the sulfur baths washed clean many haunts.

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*Old Stones, New Roads*, Main Street Rag Publishing,  
[www.mainstreetrag.com](http://www.mainstreetrag.com)

*murmurs at the gate*, Unsolicited Press,  
[www.unsolicitedpress.com](http://www.unsolicitedpress.com)

*Billboard in the Clouds*, Curbstone Press/Northwestern University Press, <http://nupress.northwestern.edu/>

**See also:**

Rancourt's [website](#)

[\*Native Voices: Indigenous Poetry, Craft, and Conversations\*](#),  
ed. by CMarie Fuhrman and Dean Radar, Tupelo Press.

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# An Interview with Elliot Ackerman

*Elliot Ackerman is the author of four novels—most recently Red Dress in Black and White, set in Istanbul primarily during the 2013 Gezi Park protests—and a memoir.*

*Here's a synopsis of [Red Dress](#):*

“Catherine has been married for many years to Murat, an influential Turkish real estate developer, and they have a young son together, William. But when she decides to leave her marriage and return home to the United States with William and her photographer lover, Murat determines to take a stand. He enlists the help of an American diplomat to prevent his wife and child from leaving the country—but, by inviting this scrutiny into their private lives, Murat becomes only further enmeshed in a web of deception and corruption. As the hidden architecture of these relationships is gradually exposed, we learn the true nature of a cast of struggling artists, wealthy businessmen, expats, spies, a child pulled in different directions by his parents, and, ultimately, a society in crisis. Riveting and unforgettably perceptive, *Red Dress in Black and White* is a novel of personal and political intrigue that casts light into the shadowy corners of a nation on the brink.”

*Wrath-Bearing Tree is featuring an excerpt from Red Dress this month, and were glad that Ackerman agreed to drop in for a chat to accompany it. Here, he talks with WBT co-editor Andria Williams.*

*ANDRIA WILLIAMS: Hi, Elliot. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I just finished Red Dress in Black and White, which the Seattle Times called “cunning, atmospheric” and “splendidly gnarly” (!).*

*I'd love to hear about the writing process for the novel. I think I remember reading that you spent several years on this book. What gave you the idea for a love story set in Istanbul?*



Elliot Ackerman, author of  
'Red Dress in Black and  
White (Knopf, May 2020).

ELLIOT ACKERMAN: I lived in Istanbul for about three years, arriving shortly after the 2013 Gezi Park protests that are mentioned in the novel and staying until 2016. Throughout my time in Istanbul, I could see how those protests—a political event—echoed in the personal lives of so many of my Turkish friends. I've always been interested in the fault line between the political and the personal, so it felt very natural to tell a love story not only set in Istanbul but also set within a society in crisis, which Turkey very much was during the years that I lived there.

AW: *One of the other Wrath-Bearing Tree editors, Michael Carson, and I both noticed some similarities – in tone, in the characters, in the use of a young boy as onlooker – to Graham Greene's The End of the Affair (but without the fatal dose of Catholicism!).*

*Is Greene an influence, or are these similarities coincidental? Who are your biggest literary influences?*



EA: I've always admired Greene's work and I think he and I are interested in many of the same themes, namely the intersection of the personal and the political. *The End of the Affair* is a great book but didn't directly influence the writing of this book, though I certainly see what you and Michael are talking about. William, the boy you mentioned in my novel, does serve as a more passive onlooker. The sections that are told from his point of view are important because they give us a glimpse of the principle characters from outside the many other biased perspectives that occupy the novel.

As for other literary influences, it's tough to say because they're constantly evolving. There are, of course, those classic writers who you encounter when you're younger and constantly return to (Greene, Hemingway, Malraux, Didion, Balzac, etc.) but I'm always reading and being influenced by what I read, so of course that filters into my work. Recently, I've greatly enjoyed books by Renata Adler (*Speedboat*), Richard Yates (*Young Hearts Crying*), Catherine Lacey (*Pew*), Richard Stern (*Other Men's Daughters*) and Shelby Foote (*Love In A Dry Season*).

AW: You write quite frequently from what could be considered an "othered" position: with close third-person perspective on characters who are Afghan, in *Green on Blue*; women, such as Mary in *Waiting for Eden* and Catherine in *Red Dress in Black and White*; as a Turkish businessman in *Red Dress*, and as a dozen or more other people across your work who aren't like yourself.

As a fiction writer myself, I'm interested in this part of the craft, and am wondering if you could speak a little about it. Some writers of fiction stick close to their own time frame, social milieu, and so forth, and that can work very well. But I think there's a certain bravery and liveliness to writing from a variety of perspectives.

Did this sort of wide-ranging style come naturally to you, or

*did you have to train yourself? What about the adjacent humor of being frequently referred to as a “journalist” when you so often write from completely different points of view than your own?*

Who is to say that I [even] am writing about the “other”? In *Green on Blue*, I wrote about a young man fighting in an Afghan militia; I spent three years embedded and fighting in the very militias I wrote about. Mary is a woman, sure, but she is a military spouse; if you know anything about my life, it will probably come as no surprise to you to learn that military spouses who’ve lost loved ones certainly don’t feel like the “other” to me, and in the case of Catherine nor does a woman living in the expatriate scene in Istanbul. Also, if you believe, as I do, that every person contains within them the “feminine” and the “masculine” it is no problem for a man to write from the female perspective or for a woman to write from the male one. As for Murat, he is Turkish, but he is also a businessman who struggles to balance his personal life with his professional life; and, well, let’s just say I have plenty of loved ones who have faced similar struggles.

I only bring up these examples because the current fashion in so much of literature—and, sadly, in art—is to force writers into a cul-de-sac of their own experiences as defined by those who probably don’t know them and are assuming the parameters of the artist’s experience based on some superficial identity-based epistemology. That type of censoriousness makes for bad art and, in my view, bad culture.

AW: *Thanks for those thoughts!*

*Much of ‘Red Dress’ is set around a dramatic protest which took place in Gezi Park, when citizens rallied against the government’s urban development plan. Can you talk about these protests? Were you present for any of them?*

EA: These protests—which occurred principally in May and June

of 2013—began as a demonstration against the proposed development of Gezi Park—a greenspace in central Istanbul—into a shopping mall. The government reacted brutally to handful of activists and then the protests spread, becoming the greatest political upheaval in Turkish society in a generation.

I wasn't present for the initial set of protests but was present for the subsequent protests in the fall and into the following year. There are scenes in the novel that describe the protests and I recreated those based on conversations I'd had with friends who participated, as well as the work I did as a journalist covering subsequent protests in the same parts of the city.

AW: *Do you see reverberations of the Gezi Park protests in the current and enduring protests that have surged in the United States this summer?*

EA: The way the protests have captivated the public consciousness is certainly similar, but American society isn't Turkish society. The aftermath of the Gezi Park protests led to the re-writing of the Turkish constitution, a failed military coup, the creation of an executive presidency as opposed to a parliamentary one where Erdoğan can stay in power indefinitely, as well as the imprisonment of thousands of anti-Erdoğan intellectuals and the state takeover of the majority of media outlets. We're far from there, and I think it's important not to engage in hyperbole, as if the situation in the U.S. (troubling as it may be) is analogous to Turkey.

AW: *In an interview with The Rumpus, you speak very eloquently about your time in the Marine Corps, and how much of it is essentially about "building love" for fellow Marines, but then being willing to tear this down – that the mission supersedes even such a strong love.*

*I see elements of this thinking in both Waiting for Eden and Red Dress. Can you speak more about this idea, in military*

*service, life, and art?*

EA: Art is the act of emotional transference. How often have you gone to a museum and been overwhelmed by a work of art? Or seen a film and cried? When I am writing—if it's going well—I am feeling something as I put the words on the page, and if you read that story and feel some fraction of what I was feeling then I have transferred my emotions to you. That we both feel something when we engage with the subject matter is an assertion of our shared humanity and that is an inherently optimistic act.

To create this type of art—in stories—you have to learn to love your characters. In the military—to serve, to sacrifice—you have to learn to love the people you are alongside. My time in the Marines taught me how to love people across our many seemingly profound but ultimately superficial divides. That impulse has ultimately found its way into my writing. My hope is that it finds its way to my readers in the stories I tell.

*AW: What are you working on next?*

EA: I've co-authored a novel with my friend Admiral James Stavridis, whose last position was as Supreme Allied Commander Europe; it is a work of speculative fiction (so a bit of a departure for me) which imagines what would happen if the U.S. and China went to war, primarily at sea. It is a story told on a broad canvas with a large cast of characters. It's been a lot of fun to write and will come out in March 2021, with Penguin Press. These calamitous events take place in the year 2034, from which the novel takes its title: *2034*.

*AW: That sounds like lots of fun. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me, Elliot.*

[Red Dress in Black and White](#) is now available wherever books are sold.

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# Lauren Johnson Interviews Amy Waldman, Author of 'A Door in the Earth'

*Amy Waldman's novel, A Door in the Earth, follows Parveen, a young Afghan-American woman who returns to her war-torn homeland after discovering a memoir by humanitarian Gideon Crane. Parveen is not the only American influenced by the book; Mother Afghanistan has become a bible for American counterinsurgency operations in the country. If part of that story rings familiar, it is: The book-within-a-book was inspired by Three Cups of Tea, Greg Mortenson's 2006 memoir of building schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was later revealed to be largely fabricated.*

*I was one of the legions of soldiers who read and fell head over steel-toed boots for Mortenson's story. Like Waldman's protagonist, I ultimately found myself in a remote corner of Afghanistan in 2009. As a military information operations officer, I was charged with "winning hearts and minds"—an instrument of the "kind power" advocated by Gideon Crane. I didn't share Parveen's Afghan heritage, but I see my younger self in her idealism and naivety. I feel the crushing blow when expectations and reality clash.*

*I relate these parallels to Waldman before our interview, and she begins by asking me questions about my experience—curiosity cultivated through a career in journalism, but also desire to learn, to investigate, to understand. Waldman's first novel, The Submission, explores the aftereffects of 9/11 on American soil, imagining what might happen if a Muslim-American wins a blind competition to*



*design a Ground Zero Memorial. A Door in the Earth is her second novel.*

**Lauren Johnson:** You worked as a reporter for a number of years with the *New York Times* and covered both ground zero in the aftermath of 9/11 as well as the war overseas for a few years. I'd love to hear you talk a little about what led you to pursue journalism to begin with and how your experiences reporting after 9/11 shaped your perspective as a writer.

**Amy Waldman:** I finished college and didn't quite know what I wanted to do. I was interested in writing, film, but it was all fairly vague. And then I ended up moving to South Africa a year after graduation. First, I was volunteering there in a university—teaching and helping in other ways, and then I began doing some freelance reporting. It was 1992, 1993, so apartheid was ending. It was a very exciting time in the country's history, and so partly I felt like being a reporter gave me a way to go witness all of this, gave me a reason to be going to rallies and protests. I have a strong interest in social justice, so it was a way to write about things I cared about. I sort of felt like I backed into journalism a little bit. But then felt like, *Okay, this is what I want to do.*

I came back from South Africa, worked at the magazine *Washington Monthly*, then went to the *New York Times* and spent five years writing about New York City. And then 9/11. I was in New York for about six weeks afterward covering the aftermath and then was sent overseas . . . I ended up in Afghanistan in November 2001, then went back repeatedly over the next few years. It was, obviously, a much more peaceful time there. There was a lot more freedom of movement. I went to Helmand and places that within a few years it was much more dangerous to go to. So I had, I think, a very personal, visceral sense of what was happening with the war because I had seen this window of optimism and openness, and then watched it closing.

I was actually briefly sent to Iraq after the invasion. And I think that was really informative for me, too—in registering all the ways that diverted resources and attention from Afghanistan, but also the sense of an occupation was much more palpable there. I think Afghanistan did have this identity much more as the ‘good war,’ and our reasons for being there were clearer. And yet, it helped me see certain parallels between Iraq and Afghanistan and our presence in both places. Also just watching things start to sour. In Iraq I felt them start to sour very quickly. I was there maybe two months at the most, and within that time I saw the change. Afghanistan, it was much slower – the disillusionment that built, among Afghans, but also my sense is even within the military, and for reporters as well. Even once I left the region I followed really closely what was happening with the war and our presence there and just felt very confused by it. I guess it’s the simplest way to put it. You know, more and more this sense that there was—and frankly is—no good solution to this, and that we hadn’t thought through where this was going.

I think that’s a very long way of saying that all of my post-9/11 experience fed into the first novel I wrote. *The Submission* is much more about America and how 9/11 changed us at home. I’m interested in, even in fiction, moral questions and the choices we have to make both as a society and individuals about how to answer these moral questions. The first novel came out of reporting in America and reporting abroad and the ideas of: What did we want to be as a country in the wake of 9/11? What were our values? What should change? What should stay the same? And then for individuals, how did your personal, political, psychological history weigh into how you answer these questions?

I really loved Afghanistan as a country. I always loved going there. I loved the people that I met and people that I worked with. I was good friends with a lot of our interpreters there. I felt anguish about what I saw happening. [*A Door in the*

*Earth*] is, in a way, another chapter of what I had started with the first novel: who we are at home. Afghanistan was where I wanted to try to understand who and what we are abroad.

I also felt like 9/11 created this whole new set of tropes and ideas and conditions about who we imagined ourselves to be. *Three Cups of Tea* I think was so popular because it fit into that idea of who we think we are. I was interested in idealism, even going back to when I went to South Africa as a young person. I kind of love that impulse in Americans, to want to go and help abroad. But I also think as I've gotten older I question it more and see it as much more complicated, and I don't have as clear a sense of how to think about it. Fiction for me is a good place to work out things that I don't know the answers to, or don't exactly know how to think about. So that all fed into this novel. That was a very long answer.

**Lauren Johnson:** I appreciate long answers because these are challenging things to think about, and I don't think there is an easy answer a lot of times. I heard that for *The Submission* the idea kind of lodged itself in your brain, and you had initially shelved it while you were working as a journalist. Then it wouldn't stop gnawing at you so you decided to listen to it, and you stopped working for the *Times* and wrote the novel. Was the seed for *A Door in the Earth* similar to that? Was it an obsession, for lack of better words?

**Amy Waldman:** Yeah, it actually was. I had not read *Three Cups of Tea*, and then Jon Krakauer published *Three Cups of Deceit* and 60 Minutes did its report, and I became completely obsessed with the entire thing. So I read *Three Cups of Tea* at that point. I wasn't even that interested in [Greg Mortenson] as a person or what his motivations were, I was more interested in why did so many people buy into this myth? What did that say about us? I felt like it got at something pretty deep, both in who we are as Americans, but also in the War on Terror, the war in Afghanistan. I couldn't easily articulate

what that was, but I felt like it really went to the heart of something there. And then I also was really interested in what would it feel like to believe in this cause or this person and then find out that in all kinds of ways, it wasn't what you thought it had been.

I spent a lot of time online reading reactions from people after *Three Cups of Tea* was exposed. I was interested in the people who were really angry at Krakauer for exposing him—this idea that we need heroes, and it's wrong to tear them down, even if they're false heroes. But then I would find, say, a 14 year old girl who would be like, '*I'm crushed, because I really believed in this and raised money for this.*' What would that feel like to be that young and having this experience? I was trying to make sense of why was it so popular, why did the military latch on to it, and then what would it feel like to find out that basically you've hitched your idealism—which is a genuine feeling—to something that's false. I kept meeting people who said, '*Oh, I went into education because of that book,*' or '*My brother went to help in Pakistan because of that book.*' So, if something's not true but it's motivating people to help, that's really interesting as well. So anyway, it just seemed very messy and interesting. I usually feel like when I become obsessed with something, that's fertile territory for a novel.

**Lauren Johnson:** And why did you choose 2009 as a time frame in particular?

**Amy Waldman:** Initially, I think I didn't have the novel set in any particular year. When I'm writing fiction I'm always torn, especially the kind of fiction I do—at least everything I've done so far—which is so obviously spun off reality in some way. I'm always torn about how specific do I want to get? In *The Submission*, I don't say it's 9/11. I left it vague in terms of what the attack in question was. I never use the term 9/11 or September 11 anywhere in the book, because I felt like it just takes you out of a fictional world into one that

immediately you're thinking about all your associations and experiences with 9/11.

In this case, the more I thought about it and started looking at different points in the war, I just felt like it actually does matter to be specific. That year was so interesting to me, for all the reasons I weave into the novel: everything from Obama becoming president and rethinking the whole Afghanistan strategy, to the number of casualties of American soldiers rising, to growing public disenchantment at home. . . It really just felt like that was a pivotal year in the war. And so it seems a good pivot point to set the story when all of this is going on.

**Lauren Johnson:** And it's definitely rooted in reality. You mentioned a lot of things that took place that year, including the airstrike in Farah that led to massive civilian casualties, and the attack in Kunduz in November where the British reporter was kidnapped. I appreciated all those little reminders. And I think someone who maybe didn't have an obsession with that region in 2009-2010 would still pick up on those elements, that it feels very grounded.

**Amy Waldman:** Yes, but I think, equally though, someone who didn't know anything—in a way it wouldn't matter. It's almost like I'm speaking to you as a reader in one way and another reader in another way. I'm putting all those things in; to me, it's exciting that you would get them and register them and their significance. But equally, I know there's a lot of readers who will not have paid any attention to any of those things. I kind of like tucking in reality into fiction. I like that people who get it will get it. But I also feel like, if you don't, that's fine, too. It doesn't matter if you never read the news about Afghanistan, I want it to affect you emotionally. Maybe there's a way putting it in fiction will do that, even if you turn off the news.

**Lauren Johnson:** Yeah, absolutely. It grounds it but also has



those emotional reverberations, and I think particularly the way that you approach it from a new perspective. That's one of the things that I really appreciate about the book as a whole is all the different perspectives. You're not looking at this from the traditional whitewashed American lens that most people are used to viewing war through. You weave in all these different points of view against the backdrop of war that captures a fuller spectrum. There's Parveen—and I would love to hear more about your choice to make her your protagonist—and then all the colorful characters she interacts with along the way.

**Amy Waldman:** Originally there was going to be, I think, five different sections, and each would have a different central character. Aziz, the [military] interpreter, and Trotter [the American military commander] were going to have one section, and [Parveen] was going to have another section. But when I started working on it, it just didn't work. And so I ended up kind of folding everything into her story. And it really to me became about her story, but braided together with all these other people. I wanted someone young, because I feel like that is a point when you are more open to influences, and partly it's a novel about her wrestling with all these adult figures and mentors and influences, and kind of coming to terms with them.

The idea of a young American going abroad is a very familiar story and has been done in fiction. I decided to make her Afghan-American, partly because I wanted her to have some understanding of the culture and speak the language. I feel like every American in some way has a place that they are connected to—it can be very immediate, it can be very distant—and they're sort of these ghost places for us where you imagine a strong connection. And then what happens when that's tested and you have to come face to face with real people? Also, I'm always very interested in people who are kind of caught in between. With her and Aziz, I felt like they

were both in that situation. The question of allegiances: even if that's clear in your own mind, how do other people perceive you?

**Lauren Johnson:** You cover a really impressive spectrum. With Parveen herself, with the family she's staying with, Waheed's family, who are mostly just trying to exist and live their lives in this remote Afghan village, and then Colonel Trotter and these American soldiers who are also inspired by Gideon Crane's book and the "kind power" notion. And I'm glad you mentioned Aziz, I think he was my favorite character.

**Amy Waldman:** Oh, that makes me happy!

**Lauren Johnson:** I think interpreters don't get a lot of attention for the precarious position that they're in, straddling these different worlds and competing agendas. I really appreciated that perspective. But again, it's how you weave everyone all together. Parveen observes at one point that her "sympathies kept tilting back and forth, never finding a perfect place to rest." I have to say, that's how I felt throughout the book, not really comfortable aligning myself 100% with any character. And I think that's in large part because of all these different perspectives that you invite us to consider. Would you say that one of your messages is that there *is* no comfortable place to rest in war?

**Amy Waldman:** Yes. Although I'd maybe say there's no comfortable place to rest in life!

**Lauren Johnson:** That's a fair edit!

**Amy Waldman:** But yes, I think that's true. When I was younger I was very certain about a lot of things, and I think I've become less and less so, which is often frustrating. There are things—and I could go on at great length—where I have a very strong sense of what's right and what's wrong, including in war. I mean, there's a lot happening right now in Afghanistan that I think is egregiously wrong. But that feeling you have

is exactly what I wanted. That certainly in that situation there's nobody's saintly or perfect, whether that's because they're trying to survive or that's human nature. There shouldn't be a comfortable place to rest. Certainly in war.

**Lauren Johnson:** I grew up in the era of chick flicks where in 90 minutes someone falls in love and lives happily ever after; it's just this clean-cut story line. As I've gotten older I realized that's not the case, basically ever. And that's part of coming of age. To me, a lot of Parveen's experience read like a coming of age story also.

**Amy Waldman:** Yes.

**Lauren Johnson:** She's confronted with the fact that life isn't black and white, that there are shades of gray everywhere, and it's uncomfortable. Your decisions have ripple effects, and even if you're making them with good intentions, you can't count on them having positive outcomes.

**Amy Waldman:** The more I worked on this novel, that idea became something I thought about more and more. Just what do our actions do? In the name of whatever cause you believe in, how do you affect other people? That's the beauty of being alive—how interconnected we all are—but also it's very hard to live without having repercussions in the lives of others, whether you want to or not. And the gap between our ideas of ourselves in the world and our realities in the world interests me too. How do you ever stand far enough outside yourself to even see how you affect others?

**Lauren Johnson:** Having not been back to the country in so long, you render the landscape so strikingly. And you also invite readers into this very intimate setting of an Afghan home, which is mostly closed off to us here in the West. I would love to hear more about how you were able to capture the spaces and characters authentically.

**Amy Waldman:** The landscape there made such an impression on

me. Some of that just stayed with me, and then I certainly drew on the reporting I had done when I was there. There's little lines and things people said to me when I was a reporter that I probably wove into the book or gave me the seed for an idea. So I had that base for having spent time there, but it was very difficult not being able to—or, I should say, deciding not to—go back and research. Instagram I love for the visual reminders it provides, and there's so many photographers doing great work there. I read a lot of books, including *Afghan Post* [by Wrath-Bearing Tree co-editor Adrian Bonenberger]. There are quite a few documentaries that I watched, and I also did a lot of research on maternal mortality. I read [military blogs] for more logistical detail. Anthropology—there's not so much that's super recent just because of conditions, but there's enough to be really helpful. There's a lot out there. But it's not the same as going back.

**Lauren Johnson:** I'm glad you mentioned maternal mortality. Could you talk about why you chose to focus on that as one of the central issues? [Crane, the humanitarian, witnesses an Afghan woman's death in childbirth, and in response decides to build a clinic for women in her village]

**Amy Waldman:** Yes. So once I came up with the idea that, in a way, it's a book about a book—the influence of this memoir—I was trying to think, who is this person who wrote it? What was he doing in this village? I don't remember exactly what the spark was for that, but as soon as I thought about it, it totally made sense. I mean, maternal mortality is a huge issue in Afghanistan, and it also was a way to get at one of the complicated things about this war, which is the whole issue of women. Are we there to save them or protect them? Is that a true reason or a pretext? And also the contradictions embedded in that—for example the way we've mostly allowed women to be left out of the peace process.

And so I wanted to see how those contradictions in America's

relationship to women in Afghanistan would play out in the story I'd invented. What is PR and what is a legitimate desire to help? What is our obligation? I felt like it was a way for [Parveen] to connect with women in the village as well. And then all the complexities around—and again this came out of my reporting, some of it at least—who can treat women, medically, and how does that work? So, it just seemed like the issue to build the novel around.

**Lauren Johnson:** And one of the other ways that Parveen ends up connecting with the women in the village is in reading them Crane's book, which is such an interesting layer. She quickly realizes that events and descriptions in the book don't line up with the reality of the people who were living it. Aside from that, the moments in those scenes where we get to see the women interacting away from the men and their daily routines was a really powerful image. They take their burqas off and they're teasing each other, and harping on their husbands, talking about sex; just women being women. I think that's an important element, too, that gets lost in the politicized discussions of war: just people being people and the connective power of that.

**Amy Waldman:** I definitely wanted to have that. I would say the war was the thing that propelled the novel into existence, and yet I didn't want it only to be about that. And I did feel strongly that all the reasons I really loved Afghanistan, I wanted to try to get some of that across. And, you know, people everywhere are just funny and saucy and smart. Someone once said to me that it's much easier to focus on the differences with people in other cultures than it is the similarities. That was probably in the context of being a reporter, but I think it's true in fiction too, that it's very easy to exoticize everything that's different or extreme in another culture. But the truer portrait is capturing at least some of ways that people are quite similar anywhere: their friendships, their relationships, their desires—all of that.



**Lauren Johnson:** Were any of the moments that occur in the book echoes of experiences you had in Afghanistan?

**Amy Waldman:** Good question. Funny, at this point it's so hard to even sort everything out. There are things that were not experiences, but were taken from the news. [One incident, removed to avoid spoilers] is based on this tiny, one paragraph news item that I found years ago . . . that's always really haunted me. Frankly, the Konduz incident—the translator who died was someone I was really close to and had worked with, so that never went away for me. I had very strong feelings about it and wanted it not forgotten. And then there would just be little things. Like when Waheed says to Parveen, “You know, I wish my wives could do what you do.” When I was in a Pashtun area reporting, this man said that to me: “I wish my wife could do what you do.” I just never expected to hear that there.

There are little things that in one way or another either are my experience or things I read. [I read a paper] about the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, the psychology of an occupation, and that fed into my thinking: this idea of, is an old man just an old man or is he dangerous? What does it mean to be an occupying power? As the fear increases, how do you start to interact with the population? I feel like that's a central tension of our presence there: Supposedly trying to help and win hearts and minds, and yet we're also terrified and have no idea who to trust. How do those things coexist with each other?

**Lauren Johnson:** I actually wrote down a line where Parveen wonders: “What did it mean to offer help to people you don't trust?”

**Amy Waldman:** Exactly.

**Lauren Johnson:** That was certainly something on my mind when I was there, and I'm sure many of my compatriots as well. That

really complicated mixture of the inherent power that comes with being an American military member, but also the vulnerability that comes with it, and just the pervasive lack of knowledge and understanding, and then the rules that are being dictated by people who aren't actually on the ground—and you captured that web in really kind of an appropriately discombobulating way.

**Amy Waldman:** That's interesting, that idea that you are not making the rules. And also that, in this novel, and it seemed to me there, like the rules were always changing.

**Lauren Johnson:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Amy Waldman:** I think for most Americans and Afghans that's incredibly confusing. Because there's no consistent relationship. And even as a soldier, you're still a human being, and you're told one day to perceive the people in this place a certain way, and the next day you're told to perceive them in a different way. How are you supposed to reconcile that internally as well as externally in your actions and your reactions?

**Lauren Johnson:** Right. And how are you supposed to inspire trust in an interaction when you're going in with body armor and two weapons and ballistic sunglasses and fourteen ton vehicles? So many paradoxes inherent in war.

**Amy Waldman:** Yes, paradox is the word.

**Lauren Johnson:** The fact that this war has now been going on for 18 years, I think it's fitting that this is not a book that wraps up neatly at the end. Parveen has this great line that it is "a war shaggy with loose ends." Which does not satisfy my idealistic American desire for happy ending, but it's also very appropriate. Was that a conscious decision?

**Amy Waldman:** Yes. It was hard for me to imagine a happy ending, to be honest. I think this is a very slow moving, epic

tragedy and it's gotten so much worse—for Afghans, in particular, in the past few years. I just felt like the most honest ending was one that was unresolved . . . It's more just, we have to think about these things. We can't just be congratulating ourselves all the time on being the saviors of the world. Not that we really are any more. In some ways I feel like I'm writing about history more than the present.

[I also want to] touch on the role anger, for lack of a better word, played in the writing of *A Door in the Earth*. So many things about the war that were treated as normal—the lies or withholding of information; the false rhetoric about success or victory in the war; the sending of soldiers on missions or to outposts that made no sense or seemed destined to fail; the loss of life on both sides, of both soldiers and civilians, and the lack of questioning whether those deaths, or lifelong injuries, were a cost worth paying—seemed wrong to me, and the novel was a way to work through that. I think one problem with the civilian-military divide is that civilians don't think they have the right to ask these kinds of questions, because we're not serving, when for me that's the reason we're obligated to ask them.

**Lauren Johnson:** These two novels, it seems, very organically fed into each other. Do you think you'll stay in that zone, about the aftereffects of 9/11? Or is that still to be determined?

**Amy Waldman:** I think it's to be determined. I mean, sometimes I think there must be a trilogy. It seems like these things always come in threes, but I don't know what the third one would be. And I definitely don't want to force it. Both these books really just came out of, as we talked about, kind of obsessions. And so, I feel like if I don't have another obsession, I will not write another novel along those lines. I might write another novel, but it would be totally different. And yet, I clearly am consumed by post-9/11 America and the War on Terror. And since it never seems to end, I guess

eventually there may be another novel. But I would rather it all ended and then I could write about something else.

**Lauren Johnson:** Do you ever see yourself going back to journalism?

**Amy Waldman:** I don't think I would go back to the kind of journalism I was doing. I could see doing more essay writing. I keep thinking about how to write about what's going on now . . . The Afghan deaths, both soldiers and civilians, and the numbers—how extreme that has become. And also the number of airstrikes the US is now carrying out there, and how little information there is about that—I think that's what's really disturbing, that it almost becoming this secret war where we just have very little sense of what's going on and who's doing what. But I don't want to write a novel about that. It would be more an essay or op-ed. So that's a long way of saying I don't know.

**Lauren Johnson:** Well you can be sure that I will be reading everything you ever write from now on.

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## **Representation: An interview with new literary agent Tracy Crow**



*Tracy Crow, with her corgi puppy, Hope. The puppy is the newest furry member of the household, but hope is always something Crow looks for in the writing she represents.*

*Two years ago, Tracy Crow, an author, former Marine, invited me to be a part of the MilSpeak Foundation ON POINT Women Warriors Writing Workshops she took around the country, offering a free weekend of writing instruction to women veterans and veteran family members. The workshops, in Tampa and Charlotte, were creatively inspiring and a hell of a lot of fun, not only for those who attended but for the cadre of instructors she'd pulled together. I'll never forget being a part of that team.*

At every venue we met scores of women writers, many of whom had already met Tracy in one capacity or another. They'd either attended a previous workshop, had hired her for her book doctoring skills, or had served with her in uniform. And at each location she added more people to the list of writers she offered to coach, inviting them to join online workshop groups or to send her their manuscript for one-on-one review. She seemed tireless.

The workshops were for writers who'd never taken any serious writing instruction as well as writers who had already been published a number of times. For Crow, it seemed a desire to be creative and to improve your skills was the only requirement for her attention.

Crow has often helped writers with finished manuscripts find homes for them. She'd also applied her skillful pen to help guide a manuscript from unsellable to sought after. Eventually, she realized she'd been on a pathway that led to one thing—officially becoming an advocate for writers and their work. Tracy has now opened the doors to Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC and is now representing more than a dozen authors. I wanted to talk to her about that.

While I spoke to Tracy over the phone, she apologized for the hullabaloo her furry friends were making in the background. Since they are often the subjects of her social media posts, I already knew there were any number of things a black lab, a yellow lab, a beagle-anatolian shepherd, and a corgi puppy can get into when their mom's back is turned. Most of the time, I couldn't actually hear them through the connection, but evidently, as soon as we started to converse, they had all decided it was time to gnaw on their bone chews. I can only imagine what that sounded like.

How many books have you helped bring to the market?

I can tell you that just prior to my making a decision to

become an agent, I had helped place four books in eighteen months. And that was when I really started thinking seriously about it. But what helped me make the decision, was when [an author] I was working with asked me if I'd feel comfortable opening the door for her for a particular publisher. Just prior to that, a different author's book had come out and I realized that something in this book had been left out. I felt, at the time, that it wasn't for me to say anything and I figured the publisher would catch it, but they didn't and that left me feeling responsible. The writer didn't have an agent, but I'd turned her over to the publisher, assuming they would take care [of the missing piece] but they didn't. The bottom line is, when [the new author] asked me to help her with a publisher, I told her I was at the stage where I really felt guilty if I wasn't able to walk a writer through the entire process. If I'm not an agent, I can't represent the writers the way they deserve.

I did end up helping [the author] get her book in front of [the publisher], giving her instructions to call me with any questions because it can be a complicated process. So now, her book is with them and in their publishing pipeline. A few months later, I realized I was ready. So I formed the LLC and I haven't looked back.

*Are you mostly getting submissions from word-of-mouth or are you on Agentquery.com or any of the other agent solicitation sites?*

I'm on Publishers Marketplace, but I'm getting as many manuscripts as I can comfortably handle. When you've gone through an MFA program and all of your MFA writing friends realize they have an agent among them, things can go a little crazy. They all start sending you their manuscripts and they all start referring their friends. And these are all excellent writers. I mean, really, really good writers. So it's not like I have to go digging and searching as a lot of new agents might have to do. A lot of good work is coming my way. Of

course I follow the latest trends, but I don't really need to go searching for manuscripts. In fact I have to be very selective. I'm boutique. It's just me. So far. And there are only so many hours in a day, only so much I can read at a time. And I have this thing—that is, if I say I'm going to read your work, that doesn't mean you're going to hear from me in six months. You're going to hear from me within 10 days. Ten days to two weeks at the most. That's a pipeline I need to keep moving. I can only read so many, and handle all of the other work I do during the day, like sending out pitches to publishers, doing research to find the right strategy and the right fit with publishing houses and certain editors and their preferences with what I have as clients.

I also have a number of clients in various stages. I have some who are finished and their work has been pitched and their manuscripts are being read by the large houses. I have several who are finishing first drafts, but because they have already written or published heavily elsewhere and I know their work and their quality, I have agreed to sign them for their new book.

Then I have one young man, who is only 22, brilliant, came to me as a referral but the work needs a lot of editing. But because the concept for this six-book series is so brilliant, I couldn't say no. I told him that this is going to be a six-month-long, intensive, MFA-level instruction and revision effort, and if he was up for that, then I would sign him. So this is intensive for both of us. Every day I have a couple of hours of editing and instruction for him. But the concept [for his series] is so brilliant. I was pleased that he had gotten 455 pages to this point, but we just have to up the diction, up the level of quality of the storytelling. The story is all there.

So I have all of these different clients in various stages. It's like having a bunch of plates spinning at different speeds, and you've got to keep each one spinning at the right



speed for that particular client. It's a little crazy.

*You're not just representing writers, teaching writing, you are doing developmental editing as well. You can't get much more full service than that.*

Yes. It used to be that I would charge for developmental editing. I can't charge for that anymore since forming the literary agency, and that was a big part of my financial income that I had to give away in order to do the agent thing. From an ethical standard, as an agent, I can't charge someone for any sort of reading or editing. I either agree to represent you and take the work as it is and we work on it from there or we don't. Anything else is unethical. There's a lot of developmental editing projects I've had to walk away from because I knew the writer wanted to be my client at some point, but I couldn't do both.

I've told others to go through an additional rewrite, and bring it to me and if we're that much further along, then I can do it. It's just this one, young 22-year-old that I've agreed to go this heavy with.

*What kind of work are you most attracted to?*



The kind of work that I would have the easiest success in placing would be military writers, or writers with military stories, because that's what I know the best and that's where I have the most contacts, and the community for support and all of that. But I have clients who are writing science fiction or fantasy that I'm excited about. I have clients that are writing upmarket women's fiction. I have a romance novelist and a cozy mystery writer.

The only things that I'm not interested in representing are crime or anything horror related, or anything that's too violent.

Recently I had to turn away the cleanest manuscript I've ever seen in my writing life by a very, very famous writer because there was so much gratuitous stuff that I knew I couldn't advocate for it.. Then the next day, I'm saying yes to this young kid whose quality of writing is not there but the story is brilliant, and I want to help prepare him and get his work ready for the world. Some decisions are pretty easy and simple to make, but most of them are hard. Anytime I have to say no, it gets me in the gut because I've been on that end and I know what that feels like.

Of course, I'm receiving no's all day. I'm sending pitches all

day to editors and hearing ... 'you know that's great but it's not quite close enough to what we want for a romance,' or 'It's on the fence,' or 'If it was only this,' or 'If it was only that.' I'm getting rejections all day, which just means I have to switch up my pitch or find a new way to approach it. And that's usually what it takes, just the right moment of timing.

It's like when I was selling real estate (in the 1990s). It feels a little like finding that perfect buyer for that perfect home. When it happens, it's a no brainer and the buyer says 'of course it's this house'. Connecting a manuscript with the right editor and publisher feels a little like that.

*What kind of things would a writer do that would cause you to reject the manuscript?*

A lot of writers, especially if they're new, will completely ignore what you've put out there as instruction for how you wish to be contacted. I understand it, because I've been at every stage of this. I understand how hard it can be, so I'm very forgiving and I don't automatically reject anyone ... unless they describe the work as a crime thriller ... because I'm not subjecting myself to that. I'm not into hard crime and horror.

Aside from that, it's the writing. I had to turn away a fellow grad school friend because the manuscript was fairly well written but the story didn't hold together. I know that in order for me to help that writer get the manuscript to a level that I could represent it would require a lot of work from me. So when I'm looking at a manuscript, I have to ask myself, how much do I love this work? How much of myself am I willing to give to it?

I'm beginning to understand why so many people are getting rejections. If the work isn't slam dunk there, agents don't have the time or they don't have the skill to give the work

the developmental edit it needs.

*I should mention that Tracy is a former assistant professor of creative writing and journalism and has years of experience guiding authors to greatness. She told me a story about one writer whose work was under consideration with an editor she knew. The editor told her he'd read the manuscript but was going to reject it because he felt something was missing. When Tracy read the work, she said the problem looked obvious to her. She consulted with the writer and made a few thematic suggestions. The writer made the changes, and now the book is in the publishing pipeline. She went on to say this:*

How many agents have the time or the developmental chops to make something like that happen? I understand now why so many writers are receiving rejection after rejection. No. No. No. No., and they have no idea how to fix something that could be great work. Agents and editors simply don't have the time, or a teaching background in most cases, so the writer never hears from them about what is missing.

And this is what I thought I could gift to my clients. If I see really solid promise in the writing, the language, the way the writer makes connections, the way the writer develops characters on the page, if they're indelible to me, if they speak to me—yet certain holes are obvious—then I'm going to give it everything I've got. If the writer demonstrates the ability to take it to the next level, then I'm open to it. Most agents would not have the time or energy for that.

*When did you officially start as an agent?*

I formed the LLC at the end of May. Since then the manuscripts have come in, I have had all this reading to do and I had to decide who would be my first clients. The first few weeks were just reading, reading, reading. I started pitching around early August, so we're just really in the first weeks of this. We have gotten really close already. There was a lot of

talking and back and forth, and I thought we would be getting an offer from one, but it turned out to not be the right fit. I feel really good about this manuscript and it's being considered at several other houses right now.

All of this takes time. And editors will take weeks to read something, then they send it to others to read, then it goes to marketing and they have all of these discussions before they ever contact me. So even though we started pitching in August, we're just beginning to hear back from editors and publishers.

*What about marketing? When you look at the manuscript, you look for good writing, good character development, but are you looking at marketability in terms of how much money the book could make? There's a lot of literary work that is wonderful, but will never make any money. How much does that impact your decision?*

There are publishers who will entertain books like that and I would go there first with a certain type of manuscript. I don't really think in terms of market because it's so slippery and I'm not following exact trends. I'm looking for the best story, the one that's going to stick with me. If I can remember the details and the characters, then I know there will be other readers who will feel the same thing. If it's the kind of book that would make a good book club discussion, then I feel that a number, at least a handful of publishers might be interested in it. So it's just a matter of finding the right one. The perfect buyer for the perfect home.

I know it's always frustrating for a writer when they find out that the marketing department was involved in the reject. They think, how am I going to compete with that? I just think that every book will find its way into the world. I know it may sound really woo woo—I tell my clients, if you're going to play with me, you're going to have to understand the woo woo parts—I tell them, if this is all about money for you, you're

going to be disappointed. If this is about getting your work into the right vehicle to get it into the world, I'm your agent. We're going to find a vehicle that makes sense for your work. We also have to allow for the mystery of it. We can't force it. The only thing I can force is to make sure I'm working every day for these writers. I can only ensure I'm opening as many doors and making as many opportunities for these writers as I can, since I'm the gatekeeper—the only way they're going to get to these publishers.

*This is a background kind of question but, I was just wondering. Why did you join the Marine Corps?*

Well, I actually wanted to join the Air Force, because I thought I'd look better in blue. They had military police and police dogs, and I wanted to get involved with that. But I found out there was a six-month waiting period. I didn't have the patience for that. So then I went down the hall and talked to the Navy recruiter. Same thing. Six-month waiting period. Then I went to talk to the Army recruiters and they also had a six-month waiting period. I was actually walking out of the building when the Marine recruiter stopped me and said, "You've checked out everybody else all morning. Aren't you even going to ask me any questions?"

Remember, this is 1977, I'd never had a single family member in the military. I looked at this recruiter and said, "You have women in the Marine Corps?" And he said, "Come on in here. Let me show you a film." Three weeks later I'm at Parris Island.

*How long were you in the Marines?*

Ten years.



*Tracy Crow, center, with attendees of an On Point writing workshop.*

*Back to the agent stuff. Do you think you're close to placing something now?*

I feel like I'm getting so much good feedback from my romance writer's book. It's the military version of The Ya Ya Sisterhood. It's really intriguing, it's really good, and it's written by the first woman JAG (Judge Advocate General) officer to go into combat and it was down in Panama. It's her first book. I met her in one of my workshops we held in Tampa. She's been workshopping with me for a year. When she finished the book, she came to me.

I do these free workshops every month ... four pro-bono workshops every month with these different women veterans groups including military spouses. So, she'd been working on this book for a year and she asked if I would look at it in terms of something I might want to represent. I told her I absolutely want to represent this.

She's also writing a cozy mystery ... it's not bloody ... it's not violent and it also has some amazing redeeming qualities in terms of the storyline that I'm always looking for. I like it

when the story demonstrates a higher purpose. What's the point? Are we just adding to the noise out there, or are we enhancing something?

But this author is really in her lane with the cozy mysteries and I expect she will write one a year and will eventually sign a multiple-book contract with someone.

I'm close with several books, but I know that my authors are counting the days and anticipating my weekly emails.

I do something that I don't think any other agents are doing. When I've had agents, I could go months without ever hearing from anybody. So, I send every one of my clients a Thursday weekly update. They're going to hear from me every Thursday. They're going to know what pitches went out and who we heard back from. Now, if I have an editor that is showing interest, I'm not going to make them wait until Thursday for that. Every one of my clients will be getting their Thursday updates.

*That's unheard of!*

I know. It's not fun when you don't have a bunch of good news. It's not fun when you have rejections to report but at least they know. Those who have had agents before, they're blown away by the level of access and weekly check-ins. Now, the clients that have never had an agent, they don't have anything to compare it to, so they're just ...'Thanks for the update!'

I know what they're feeling. Every time they check their email. Is there going to be something? I know that feeling. But at the same time I want them to have access and know they have an agent who is working for them every day and every week and they're not just a client. They matter to me.

You also have to prepare them because sometimes this process can be slow, and other times it feels like it happens overnight. Editors move, they change publishing houses, and then all of a sudden that editor who I knew there who had to



say no, can suddenly say yes to something over here. You just have to wait and you have to have faith in your work and faith in one another and give it that time to find its right, perfect vehicle into the world.

*It sounds like this is exactly what Tracy Crow should be doing right now. Is that how it feels?*

Since I got my MFA in 2005, I've had at least a dozen friends say that I really should be an agent. My husband would ask me why I wasn't an agent. I have to tell you this feels really good, to feel like I'm the champion of these writers and I can go around telling people, 'You've got to read this.' It feels so good to cheerlead and to champion on behalf of writers who maybe would have been rejected maybe dozens and dozens of times because the market is so flooded with stuff. It's joyful. It really is.

*Is there anything you wish I'd asked that I haven't asked you?*

I'm really impressed with what I'm reading today, as opposed to what I was reading in 2005. Back in 2005, when I would read that writers were getting rejected, it was like they wanted to jump off a bridge or something. Now, what I'm reading is that writers are like ... Next? They may not know why they were rejected but they're not giving up. They have stories to tell and I'm seeing a difference in attitude. It's almost like writers today, and I'm sure I'm generalizing too much, writers almost have this attitude now, that they're going to write regardless. And maybe it's because of the freedom the self-publishing pathway has opened up and offered. It's almost like they will try the traditional way but the traditional way is not going to be the final gatekeeper. And I love that. I applaud that. I want to encourage that. I tell all my writers, look, we may be going this route, but let's not get so hung up on this that we miss other possibilities. Stay open to however it unfolds. I just admire how many people know they are good writers. They know they have stories to tell. I just admire

the attitude of writers today, which is ... 'I'm gonna go write another book.' That the most important thing is being creative and allowing that creative opportunity, and not allowing people like agents or editors to steal your joy from that.

*I'm wondering if the discipline you're seeing and this determination is because your clients have some kind of military connection. Do you think it's because of that, that they are so determined?*

*At this point, the dogs went berserk. There was barking, the sound of nails sliding across the floor and a brief bit of chaos. Tracy was shooin' them out of the room, telling me to hold on because she really wanted to answer that question. When she came back, I didn't have to remind her what the question was. She jumped right in.*

What I'm seeing in various chatroom groups, various Facebook groups, there's a level of frustration at times, yes. But I'm noticing that people are saying, 'I'm still writing, I'm still going,' and these people aren't military. It's just a major change. I have friends who stopped writing after their first rejection. They haven't written since 2005. Now, it's almost like I'm seeing a different attitude that what is more important is the creativity. And they're saying, what if things fall apart and nobody ever gives them this validation they think they need to continue their work ... and I've been there, I've needed that validation too. They still know they have a self-publishing pathway that is gaining in esteem if the work is good.

[Self-publishing is] no longer considered so negative. In 2011, I published my first book that way and was scared to death my academic creative writing colleagues would discover that I had, and I would lose my job. I just think the self-publishing avenue has taken a little bit of the pressure off because they know there's still a way they can do it. They know they can still reach readers and still find their own

market. I love it!

*It's clear that Tracy loves the work. You can see the amount of heart she gives when she's with writers in her workshops or any writer gatherings. People flock to her and appreciate the energy, joy, and support she gives. This agent thing is the right path for her.*

*Tracy says if you'd like to query her, send her a synopsis of your work. She'll give it a read and if she feels like it's something she can advocate for, she will ask for the manuscript. She said she's reading queries and manuscripts from writers all the time. Contact her at [Tracy@TracyCrow.com](mailto:Tracy@TracyCrow.com) and include QUERY in the subject line.*



**Tracy Crow** is host and producer of the podcast, *Accept Your Gifts: The 22-Minute Podcast for Inspiring Your Most Creative Life*, a twice-weekly program with listeners in 12 countries.

She is also the founder of Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC, and the president and CEO of MilSpeak Foundation, Inc., a 501 (c) 3 organization dedicated toward supporting the creative endeavors of military servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

Tracy is the author/editor of six books to include the novella, *Cooper's Hawk: The Remembering*; the popular history, *It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan* with co-author Jerri Bell; the award-winning memoir, *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine*; the military conspiracy thriller, *An Unlawful Order*, under her pen name, Carver Greene; the true story collection, *Red, White, & True: Stories from Veterans and Families, WWII to Present*; and the breakthrough writing text, *On Point: A*

*Guide to Writing the Military Story*, in which Tracy combines her skills and experience as a former Marine Corps officer, award-winning military journalist, author, editor, and assistant professor of creative writing and journalism. Tracy's short stories and essays have also appeared in a number of literary journals and anthologies.

She has a B.A. in creative writing from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, and an MFA in creative writing from Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina. She and her husband, Mark Weidemaier, an MLB lifer, live on ten storybook acres in central North Carolina with their four dogs – Cash, Fenway, Hadley, and Hope.

### **The interviewer- M. L. Doyle**



M.L. Doyle calls on her years of serving as an Army Reservist to write about women in combat boots. Mary is the author of *The Peacekeeper's Photograph*, *The Sapper's Plot* and *The General's Ambition* in her Master Sergeant Harper mystery series. She has also penned *The Bonding Spell* and *The Bonding Blade*, in a planned three-book Desert Goddess urban fantasy series. *Limited Partnerships*, is her four-novella erotic romance series.

She co-authored the memoirs of two brave soldiers to ensure their stories keep their proper place in history. The memoir, *I'm Still Standing: From Captured Soldier to Free Citizen, My Journey Home* (Touchstone, 2010) with Spec. (Ret) Shoshana Johnson, an African-American POW of the Iraq War, was finalist in the NAACP Image Award. She also co-authored with Brig. Gen (Ret.) Julia Cleckley the story of her rise through Army ranks from humble beginnings despite great personal tragedy. *A Promise Fulfilled, My Life as a Wife and Mother, Soldier and General Officer* was published in 2015.

Mary's essays, reviews and interviews have appeared in *The War Horse*, *The Goodman project*, and *0-Dark Thirty*. She is part of the fiction editorial panel of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

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## Shining Light on the Darkness: An Interview with Patrick Hicks

**Andria Williams:** Patrick, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me. I've just finished reading "Into the Tunnel," the first chapter of your new novel, *Eclipse*. I was struck as always by what an immersive, detailed world you create, the tension you achieve, and the beauty and specificity of your language.

As the novel opens, we're accompanying Eli Hessel as he arrives from Auschwitz – where his whole family was lost – to a vast, mysterious Nazi project deep in a mountain. The change does not bring relief. As he's led into the dark, underground tunnel, observing the familiar cruelty of SS officers and the smells and tastes of punishment and broken bodies and death, he tries to piece together exactly what this horrible and mysterious project is and what it will require him to do.

We are learning along with Eli just what the deal is with this place, and that approach creates not only tension in the story, but an empathetic dread as we cringe along with each new shade of understanding. Did you always know that you wanted to open the novel this way, with the reader learning Eli's situation along with him, almost in real-time?



Author Patrick Hicks

**Patrick Hicks:** The beginning came to me very quickly,

thankfully. I could see it all in my head: the arrival at night, the huffing train in the background, the gaping mouth of the tunnel, the guard towers. I think there's something deep inside us as a species that recoils at the thought of going underground, and I wanted to tap into that. Many of our legends and myths revolve around a fear of caves, and the underworld, and buried rivers. That natural dread of journeying beneath the soil must have been amplified a thousand fold for the prisoners of Dora-Mittelbau. Being underground? During the Holocaust? Can you imagine?

**AW:** No, I cannot imagine.

**PH:** It must have been a unique horror to be in that concentration camp. Imagine entering that warren of tunnels as slave labor and seeing the high technology of these new things called "rockets", and now imagine knowing that you could be shot or beaten or hanged at any moment. I wanted the reader to feel that sense of horrified amazement.

It also seemed like a good way to get at what I call "the moment of crisis". That's what drives all stories—a moment of crisis. It's that moment in a character's life when everything could change, the stakes are high, and the outcome is anything but certain. If a writer can find that moment, the tension will naturally follow. I wanted the opening chapter to unfold in real time, as you say, to make everything feel immediate and dangerous. It also makes the reader feel closer to Eli. He's a likable man. We want him to live.

**AW:** Yes, from the very first line of *Eclipse*, the stakes feel incredibly high. My investment in Eli's safety only grows as I read on.

Partway through the chapter, however—without at all diminishing the momentum—the reader's granted a small measure of relief from in-the-moment dread when Eli's narration is briefly replaced by a more authoritative narrator, who

explains some of the history of the project inside Dora-Mittelbau. (That relief is short-lived as the nature of the project becomes known.)

“One thing was certain: the idea of a rocket was about to move from the realm of science fiction into the realm of science fact. What would soon rise up from blueprints would not only change the course of the twentieth-century, it would rumble down through the years to come. It influences us still. It threatens us still.”

Can you explain the project at Dora-Mittelbau, and the influence it still has? I'd be interested to hear more.

**PH:** We forget about it now, but the Third Reich had very sophisticated technology. The Allies had good reason to worry that they were quite literally being outgunned. The Nazis were developing an atomic bomb, they built the first jet plane, they had stockpiles of chemical weapons the likes of which the world had never seen before, and they also created the world's first mass produced rocket—the V-2. Wernher von Braun, who would later move to America and build the Saturn V that got us to the moon, was the mastermind behind the V-2. He tested his prototypes at a military base called Peenemünde. The Allies bombed this site in 1943—we totally destroyed it—and this led von Braun and others to realize that a secret underground concentration camp was needed, it would be an underground factory that would churn out V-2s at a dependable rate. Hitler hoped it would change the course of the war.





Tunnels where the V-2s were made. Photo by Patrick Hicks.

And so, deep in the Harz Mountains, prisoners had to blast tunnels into the earth to create this factory. Thousands of lives were lost and, today, no one really knows about Dora-Mittelbau because what was built there—the rockets—were top secret when America discovered the camp. It was hidden from the press. We didn't want the world to know much about the V-2s, so the horrors of this camp weren't put in the public eye the way that Dachau, Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Bergen-Belsen were. Even today, the name "Dora-Mittelbau" means very little to most people.

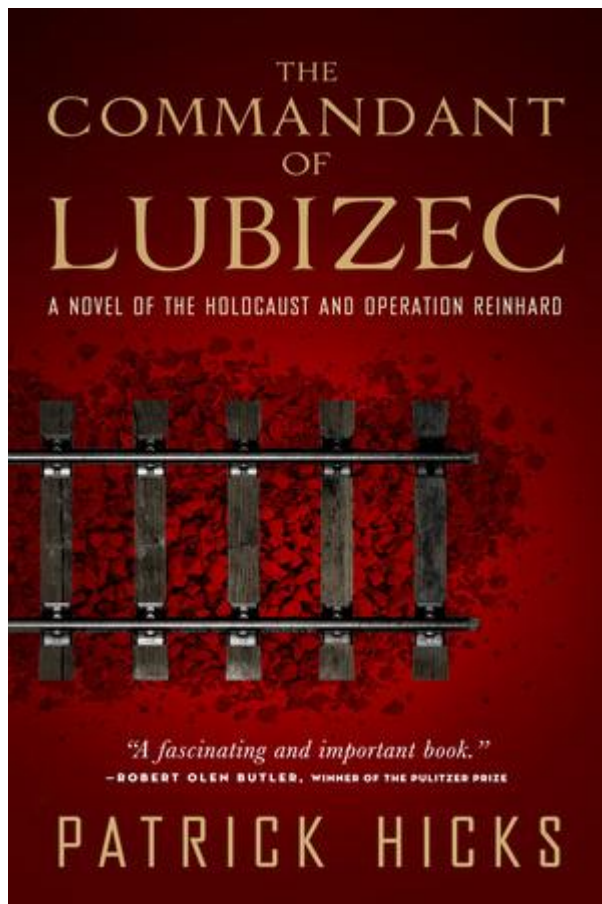
*I wanted to change that. I wanted to show that this place created the blueprint of the latter half of the twentieth-century.*

Those rockets became the ICBMs that exist today. They were

built by German scientists who would go on to work for NASA—they'd get Apollo 11 to the moon—and in return we cast a blind eye on their crimes against humanity. That's why the novel is called *Eclipse*. It's about darkness and light. The horror of the Holocaust is directly tied to the wonderment of the Apollo program, and my main character, Eli Hessel, is involved in both events. While everyone is cheering for a successful moon landing in 1969, Eli Hessel is thinking about what happened in Dora. What would it be like to see your tormentors holding positions of high rank at NASA?

One reason some people think the Holocaust and the moon landings are hoaxes comes down to one irrefutable emotion: they both seem impossible. And yet, they both happened. We as a species did both of these things. There is ash at Auschwitz and there are bootprints on the moon. For me, they represent what we are capable of doing to each other, and they also represent what we are capable of doing *with* each other. Eli wrestles with all of this, and I've rooted everything in strong historical research.

**AW:** I'd love to hear about your approach to research. Both in this novel and *The Commandant of Lubizec*, I've been amazed by the absolute grounding in place and time you achieve, the attention to specific terms and images (carbide lamps, sodium lights, gypsum, kapo, Tranquility Base). What sort of reading and travel does your research involve?



**PH:** I really appreciate this question and I'm so pleased you felt that sense of grounding. As you know yourself with *The Longest Night*, all fiction is rooted in a particular time period, and it was important for me to make the reader feel they were in Nazi Germany. I wanted them to feel this in their bones, but I can only achieve this if I do a lot of research. So, in the case of *Eclipse*, I went to Dora-Mittelbau on two separate occasions and I spent many hours wandering around the camp, talking with curators, and getting into the ruined tunnels with a guide. I read eyewitness accounts of being at Dora, I did research on von Braun, the V-2s, and the Apollo program. This meant visiting the Kennedy Space Center, the Johnson Space Center in Houston, and the Marshall Space Flight Center in Alabama where von Braun developed the Saturn V. Did you know they have a V-2 on display at Marshall but there isn't a plaque or really *anything* that explains the crimes committed at Dora? Those who were murdered have essentially been erased from the story. Seeing that—or really *not* seeing that—made me want to write about this all the more.

I did the same type of thing for my first novel, *The Commandant of Lubizec*, which is about a fictitious Nazi death camp in Poland. I did three separate research trips to the real life camps of Treblinka, Sobibór, and Bełżec. I spent over 30 hours in Auschwitz. I interviewed survivors. I have strong feelings that if I'm going to write about the Holocaust, I have to get the history correct. I mean, I just *have* to. It would be an insult to the survivors and the dead if I didn't get it right.

**AW:** What, then, do you think is the relationship between politics and art?

**PH:** They're braided together very tightly. Art isn't created in a vacuum and artists have opinions which invariably come out. If you're going to write or paint or make music, it's because you have something to say, and that "something" will be a statement on the world around you. We may not see the politics embedded in Shakespeare today, but they're there. He was a man of his era and he wrote about the world he saw.

One of my jobs as a literary artist is to shine light into the darkness. If I can illuminate new ideas and nudge readers to consider new things, then I've done something that goes beyond just entertainment. Good writing provokes us to think differently. It challenges us to care and it forces us to see the world through the eyeballs of another human being. The act of doing that is immediately political because you have to take in the world from someone else's perspective, and biases, and joys, and fears. I love how literature forces me to consider the world anew.

**AW:** Alexander Chee has said that "writing fiction is an exercise in giving a shit—an exercise in finding out what you really care about." With several books under your belt, have you figured out, or distilled, what you really care about?

**PH:** Oh, wow, what a great question. A complicated one, too.

Writers tend to orbit around the same issues and approach them from different angles in different books. I'm deeply interested in how the forces of hatred and racism can turn into violence, and I feel a responsibility to help readers understand the Holocaust better. How we remember the past matters to me and I'm drawn to the idea that previous generations aren't that much different from us. I care about cheating time and hauling the past into the present so that we might understand a particular era better, and maybe placing it into dialogue with our own concerns and values. That idea of "giving a shit"...if the writer cares, the reader will probably care too. We tell beginning writers to "find their voice" and while that's important, it's equally necessary to find out what you care about. Intellectual passion matters in writing. It's the energy that propels narrative.

**AW:** One of the most moving passages in your previous novel, *The Commandant of Lubizec*, comes right before a group of prisoners decide to attempt escape.

*"...As much as the guards wanted these prisoners to be faceless and anonymous, the very opposite was true. The prisoners were all individuals. Some had freckles. Others had crooked teeth...Many of the prisoners had ghostly pink indents on their fingers where a wedding ring once sat. Such a thing proved that they were beloved, once...At some point in time, the hot words of love had been whispered into their ears, and once, long ago, in what seemed like another life, they had all been the center of someone else's universe. They were the sun. They were the stars and light. They were the molecules of God himself."*

In much of your work, fictional characters are given all the careful specificity and individuality of real people, until we feel that we know them. Why do you undertake this painstaking work, and why do you think it's important?

**PH:** In order to write about a death camp, I knew that hundreds of minor characters would vanish into the gas chamber and never be seen again. But of course, they weren't minor characters in their own lives. These were people just like you and me. During these scenes of mass murder, I wanted the reader to feel wounded that they were being taken from us. I wanted the reader to gasp at the monumental injustice of it all and see these people as fully realized lives. That's the thing about genocide: it's often viewed just as statistics, and I didn't want that for *The Commandant of Lubizec*. I think that's one reason why it's made such a connection with readers. They see people dying in my novel—not numbers—people.

There's a chapter called "Numbers" in *The Commandant* where all of these innocent souls are being forced to run towards the gas chamber and, in each case, I wrote pages of notes on who was in that crowd. My feeling was that if I didn't care about these characters, then how would the reader care about them? In nearly every case, I had more information on these individuals than I put into the novel. I needed to see each of them, and I refused to make them faceless. That's what the Nazis did. I wanted to see people—mothers, wives, fathers, uncles, piano players, poets, plumbers, book store owners, rabbis, children. They all had lives. And those lives were stolen from them.





Present-day site of the crematorium at Dora-Mittelbau, where over 20,000 souls were lost. Photo by Patrick Hicks.

**AW:** How do you maintain perspective, and avoid slipping into despair – if that is possible – when writing about and studying the Holocaust?

(I keep thinking of the way Eli tells himself, “All is well. Yes, all is well,” to cope with the constant threat and strain. Has such an intense working relationship with one of the darkest parts of human history ever felt like too much?)

**PH:** I’ve done research at ten camps now and...sometimes I feel too close to the Holocaust. When this happens, I back up and focus on the goodness around me. It’s always there though, hanging darkly in my imagination. For example, whenever I see the Yankees play baseball on television, their striped uniforms remind me of the prisoners at Auschwitz. Or whenever I see freight trains clattering across the prairie, I think of

Poland. The same goes for smokestacks or crowds shuffling in the same direction. I teach at Augustana University, which is abbreviated on t-shirts as AU. That's what Auschwitz was abbreviated to. AU. *Konzentrationslager Auschwitz*. KZ AU. If you go to Auschwitz today, you can see that stamped onto certain items. I don't know...the Holocaust flits through my brain all the time. At least I'm removed from it by the safety of several decades. How on earth do survivors cope with what they saw? How?

**AW:** Oh, wow – I never thought that about the Yankees uniforms, and I don't know enough about the Holocaust to have picked up on the AU reference – but if I had studied it as much as you have, I can see how it might permeate all my perceptions. Like you, I have no idea how survivors are or were able to cope with what they have seen.

Which leads me to my next question, in the hope that we have learned from history: A common refrain, under the current presidential administration, is that many of its messages smack of fascism, or sound eerily authoritarian, or seem to endorse white supremacy. As a scholar of one of the worst eras of white supremacy and genocide human history has known, do these claims ring true for you?

**PH:** The Trump Administration is one of the most corrupt and reprehensible in our nation's history. He is certainly a damaged human being who is a racist, a misogynist, and his narcissism—not to mention his unmoored relationship to the truth—all make him an ideal candidate for dictatorial aspirations. This is a man who does not like criticism and demands absolute loyalty. I have no doubt he will go down in American history as a thug and villain to our democracy. After studying white supremacy and fascism for so long, Donald Trump's language has disturbing echoes with what happened in the Third Reich for sure. These comparisons can only be taken so far, though. Trump's political savvy and acumen is thankfully well below Hitler's own rise to power, and I take



comfort in the fact that, unlike Hitler, Trump does not have a private army like the SA or SS at his command.

While I'm concerned about the state of our republic, the majority of Americans reject Trump's toxic viewpoints. We also don't yet have widespread political violence in the streets with men chanting his name and beating up bystanders. If that happens—if something like Charlottesville happens regularly and routinely—that's when the claims of Trump being like Hitler take on a more ominous and deadly tone. Nazism was forged in the furnace of post-Great War Europe. Germany wanted a strong leader in the 1930s. Americans? Our nation was founded on rebellion. Sooner or later Trump will be tossed aside. Until that happens, it's good to study how one man came to power in Germany and what his dark charisma unleashed. One of my favorite quotes is from John Fowles's novel, *The Magus*. In it, he says that the tragedy of the Third Reich is "not that one man had the courage to be evil. But that millions had not the courage to be good."

It's necessary to keep such things in mind. Raise your voice. Get out there. Demonstrate. Vote. Our nation is greater than one man.

**AW:** Finally: I am a huge fan of your collection of poetry, *Adoptable*, about the building of your family: your wife and your sweet son Sean, adopted from South Korea. Each of these poems is so tender, so lovingly observant. You talk about your son's arrival, as a toddler, and his initial terror; his mastery of the English language; and you imagine very movingly the birth mother who surrendered him mere hours into his life.

You write:

"what catches my eye is the gap

between when he burrowed into this world,  
and when he was given to an orphanage.

In these missing hours, I imagine his birth mother  
cupping the grapefruit softness of his head.

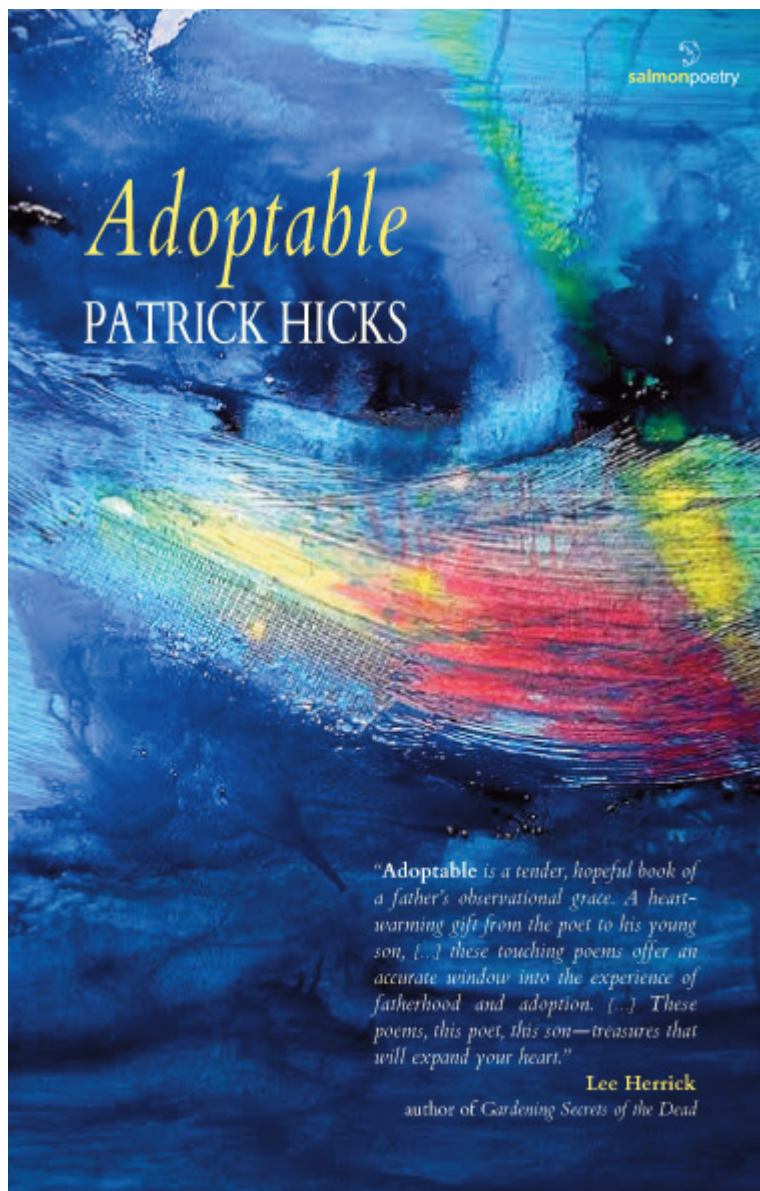
She breathes in his scent,  
kisses his nose, memorizes

the topography of his face.

And then, reluctantly,

she lets him go."

You're able to turn your remarkable empathy and gift of language to almost anyone you choose. Can you talk a little about your journey to fatherhood and how it has influenced your writing and your art?



**PH:** I'm so happy we're ending on this note, a note of love. I also want to thank you for these thoughtful questions, Andria. It's been a fun conversation.

I wrote *Adoptable* at the same time that I wrote *The Commandant of Lubizec*, and although I didn't realize it back then, I really needed to do this. I couldn't write about the Holocaust without occasionally turning away to focus on the good things in my life. Adoption is complicated and beautiful and messy and confusing. My son will have plenty of questions about his birth country and his birth family—I won't be able to answer these questions—but I'm looking forward to walking next to him as he searches. Aside from all the normal things a father worries about, I'm also thinking about racial issues, and belonging, and what it means to be an American. Since becoming a dad, I've realized all those clichés about being a parent are true. They exist for a reason. *The toughest job you'll ever love. Being a parent changes you forever. You don't know love until you have a kid.* They're all true, at least for me.

I sometime wonder what my son will make of my writing when he's older. One of the reasons I wrote *Adoptable* is because I wanted to capture the forgettable moments of his childhood—the day to day stuff. He already has huge missing pieces about background, so the least I could do was write about things he did as a toddler and try to explain how much we love him.

Being a parent has changed me as a writer for sure. I'm now totally aware that my need to write means that I'm *not* spending time with him. When you're single it's okay to be selfish and lock yourself in an office but, when you've got a child, that compulsion to get ideas onto the page takes on a new dimension. I'm a more focused writer now. I don't fluff around like I used to. My writing time is more intense and disciplined. And when I *do* write about the Holocaust, I now see all of my characters as someone else's child. I see the timeline of a single life more sharply. Maybe it helps me to remember how fleeting our time on this planet really is. And,

when I think about how temporary our bodies really are, it makes the crime of genocide all the more monstrous, all the more important to write about.

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## **Fighting Like a Girl Means Not Being a Pussy: Mary Doyle Interviews Kelly Kennedy**

It's never easy to voice suspicions that your boss is out to get you. No matter how you describe it, the accusation sounds crazy. By the time you're ready to put your instincts into words, you've already spent hours, days, weeks making the argument to yourself and telling yourself it's all in your head. It's not until you've fully convinced yourself it's true that you'll talk about it.

Lt. Col (Ret.) Kate Germano wrote a book about it.

Germano had come into her new job as commander of Fourth Battalion with a specific set of goals. She took seriously her role in leading the unit responsible for guiding every female recruit from civilian to Marine as they met the challenges of Marine Corps basic training. The goals she'd set for her command, like boxes on a check sheet, had tick marks from top to bottom, and yet, it took her a long time to realize that, despite her successes, her efforts were being undermined. Eventually, Germano knew without doubt that her aim to prove women Marines could train alongside male Marines was being challenged by Marine Corps leadership. The men working against her started from the very top. But unlike most of us Germano had proof that her bosses wanted to see her fail.

She maps out that proof in her new book, *Fight Like A Girl*, (Prometheus Books, 2018) in a calm, methodical, and well documented way.

Helping her make that argument is her co-author, Kelly Kennedy. Kennedy, an Army veteran and journalist, uses her research skills and a logical progression to map out an argument so convincing the two authors bravely name names. The names include those of Germano's former boss, Colonel Daniel Haas and even the then, Marine Corps Commandant and now Joint Chiefs Chairman, GEN Joseph Dunford.

In 2010, when the book I co-authored with Shoshana Johnson (*I'm Still Standing*, Touchstone, 2010) was released, I remember feeling such relief that the book was well received and that my work on Shoshana's story had helped make people aware of what she'd gone through. I was anxious to speak to Kelly Kennedy about her work as a co-author on Germano's project and what it meant to be a part of telling this story that was so important, and yet, not her own.

**Mary Doyle:** I understand your agents introduced you and Kate Germano in hopes that you would work together on this project. Why do you think they thought the two of you might be a good fit? Had you ever worked on a co-authored project like this before? And how long did the project take?

**Kelly Kennedy:** Well, at first, I didn't. I had heard bits of Kate's story, and I was a bit worried that the military had it right—that she was abusive. But the more I dug in, and the more I talked with her, the more I felt not only that I trusted her (she backed up her story with plenty of documentation), but that I needed to help her tell it. Because we're both veterans, I was able to ask her some questions based on my own experiences, which sparked at least one chapter. But I was also able to tell her about my experiences as a civilian, which informed part of the story. This was my first time as a co-author. We worked on the project about 1.5

years.



Kate Germano (left) is interviewed by her co-author, Kelly Kennedy, during an event at Politics and Prose at The Wharf, April 10, 2018. Photo by Mary Doyle.

**MD:** Part of the reason I agreed to work with Shoshana Johnson on her book was because I thought her story was, not only compelling, but an important story to tell. Germano's story couldn't be more important in terms of women in the military and proof positive that the decks are stacked against them. Did the importance of this story weigh on you at all? Did the weight impede or inspire?

**KK:** It was tough to hear her tell it, and it was tough for her to tell it. She often calls me her "therapist," which is something we hear a lot as writers. Part of recovering from a traumatic event is the telling of it until the words don't



hurt as much, and it develops an overall meaning, rather than just a feeling of pain. But as the #metoo movement hit, and as we see more and more women prove themselves in infantry training, and even as we talked about women in endurance racing or crossfit or the tech world, we understood how important it was to say this is an issue that effects all of us, and that, as women, we really need to feel like we have each other's backs—that it should no longer feel heroic to say, "You okay? I got you. Here's how to..."

**MD:** How did you develop your work method and what did that look like? Was there ever a time when you had to stop and iron out issues? Or were you in sync the whole time? Did you have any influence in how the story was told?

**KK:** We started by meeting up for interviews. I would type in all of my notes, and come up with more questions, and then we would meet again. Kate speaks in story—she's clear and to-the-point, so that part wasn't terribly difficult. The harder part, I think, was getting the more emotional details out of her. Okay, that hurt, but what did you do? What about it hurt you? Where were you?

Generally, we were oddly in sync. When I sent over the proposal with the first three chapters, I think she was relieved. She has said, in reading the book, that she was terrified, but that she laughed and cried and got angry and loved it. But part of that is because she's so good. The third chapter—the one about her background—didn't quite feel right to me. I liked parts of it, but I didn't like all of it. I sent it to her and said, "I'm not feeling this." And she added and reorganized and sent back something we both liked a lot. So it was collaborative and fun and so much work.

We had written the story about the investigation as basically a long slog of the things that had been said about Kate. Our editor said, "You know. I think you lose Kate's voice here. This is her story." So we regrouped on that and focused more

on her reaction—that a lot of it was just nonsense, like hugging one person but not hugging someone else, or the captain who was angry when Kate yelled at her for not doing her job so she walked out of her office. These are not things that are normal in any other version of the military, so we concentrated on that.

And yeah, I set up the outline, and Kate liked it. I would write up a section based on something we had specifically talked about or something generally important, like the background of women in the Marine Corps, and then send it as a word document. She would add or not and send it back. But she saw everything at least twice before we sent it to the publisher.

**MD:** One of the most impressive things about the telling of this story is the bravery Kate demonstrates in being open about how personally devastating the entire experience was for her. She often says she could have taken her own life. Did you ever fear that the retelling would have a dangerous impact on her? Shoshana suffered from terrible depression and getting her to read pages always made me feel as if I was forcing her to relive things she didn't want to recall. It made me feel guilty, as if I were forcing her to bleed for others' entertainment.

**KK:** My whole career has been about traumatic stories—from being an education reporter covering the first kids-with-guns stories to a cops reporter to a war reporter. Fortunately, I was chosen as an Ochberg Fellow after the series came out that led to “They Fought for Each Other,” because not only was I traumatized by the events that inspired it, but I was doing some incredibly intense interviews for the book. One guy talked for eight hours and said he hadn't told any of those stories before. The Dart Center, which sponsors the fellowships, teaches journalists not only how to handle their own trauma, but how not to retraumatize someone. I have to say, I've never had anyone refuse to tell me a story, and I



think they trust that I'll listen, and that's huge. We're so often shut down: You've already said that. I can't hear this. But you're okay now, right? And I trust that the people I interview will be helped in the telling, and that the written story will lead to them being better able to tell it again—to invite people in. I hated seeing Kate cry, but I knew she needed to.



Kate Germano (left) is interviewed by her co-author, Kelly Kennedy, during an event at Politics and Prose at The Wharf, April 10, 2018. Photo by Mary Doyle.

**MD:** When I co-authored Shoshana's book, the "with" co-authored inclusion was negotiated from the beginning. Would you have accepted the job if you hadn't had co-author credit? Kate can obviously write since she has published in the NYT and other places. Did you worry that her ability to write would make life more difficult or less?

**KK:** I had no idea. Kate fought from the beginning to make sure I got credit—she's huge on that, in general, and she's been amazing about including me in the publicity afterward, which is fun. I think I just had no idea how it would work, but I did wonder what she'd think of those first chapters. I felt good about them, and they felt like her to me, if that makes sense, and it ended up being okay. After working with her for this much time, and seeing her so devastated as she told parts, some of the accusations against her blow me away. The idea that she could be cruel or unstable? Didn't see it, and I was watching.

**MD:** Kate makes some very bold statements and charges throughout the book, every one of which she backs up with detailed facts and a logical argument to support them. Did you have influence in how the arguments were presented? Did you know all along that you would need to include the citations and notes at the end? I was surprised at first to see the citations in the text but understand why you used them. It's further proof that her arguments are absolutely sound. Here's just one excerpt among many that is an example of her supporting arguments:

*We also had women break their hips. Male leadership assumed it was because of a physiological limitation, rather than a combination of a lack of fitness, their poorly fitted packs, and recruits running during the hikes rather than taking short, choppy steps.*

*Just like everything else at boot camp, hikes were part head game, part physical fitness. A lack of mental preparedness could make five miles seem like a marathon. But some of it was due to a lack of attention by the drill instructor staff. The hip-injury rate at Fourth Battalion had me wondering if I was training teenagers or octogenarians.*

*A lot of the problem had to do with how the women wore their packs. They wore their packs too far down, so the hip belts*

*hit the wrong place. So, as they added weight, they hurt themselves. As it turns out, at one time, our athletic trainer had conducted a class with the drill instructors to train them on how to fit the packs for the recruits. But she had given the class to the battalion the year prior, so the new Marines and recruits hadn't gotten the training. Broken hips were the result of a problem that could have been remedied with a simple solution. No one had shown the recruits how to adjust their packs properly.*

*Literally, adding insult to injury, the Marine Corps used that data –the hip injury rate–as justification for why women should be excluded from ground combat jobs.*

**KK:** Sure. She's very well-spoken and thoughtful, so I had much of the argument from the beginning. I did a lot of the research, but she constantly reads and thinks and writes, so she was sending me stuff, too. The fun one was Mona. She told me about Mona, [a section in the book about an alligator] and I kept thinking it over and thinking it over, and then it became this metaphor. So I wrote it up, and held my breath and hit send. And she was right there with me. Because she can be so black-and-white, I think part of my role was to help people understand how empathetic and funny she is, too.

**MD:** Since she was relieved of command, Kate started speaking out in the press about her position that female Marines need to train alongside their male counterparts for a long list of reasons. The way she has been treated since she began speaking out is further support for her arguments. Not only are her charges eye opening, she has never been afraid to name names and to boldly confront the issues. Did you ever caution her about the potential consequences? What is her attitude in terms of what consequences she expects?

**KK:** She understood from the beginning. Much of the time, I was trying to explain that she was going to end up helping people,

and that it would all be okay in the end—that someday she would be glad she was fired. I think she's just now starting to believe me. It's part of her make-up to be brave, so I can't imagine her backing away from anything.

**MD:** I found it interesting that you began most chapters with a letter of support Kate received shortly after she had been relieved. You also included one nastygram but she must have received many more. Some of the comments on *Marine Corps Times* are about what you'd expect. How did you and Kate prepare yourselves for the potential of negative comments once the book came out? You must have been deep into the writing when the *Marine Corps United* story broke. Did that impact the project at all?

**KK:** We talked about Marine Corps United a lot, but not as something to worry about—it was as something to fight. We've surrounded ourselves with tribe. We've worked hard and done our best. We've focused on the importance of what she had to say.

**MD:** There are a couple of places where Kate's husband, Joe Plenzler, adds his take on Kate's situation. Hearing his perspective is a major shift in the story telling but it adds an angle you wouldn't otherwise get since he worked at the pentagon and had direct connection to Marine Corps leadership. In fact, it is in one of Joe's portions that the main nugget of this book is revealed. Was this Kate's idea? Yours? Did you have to negotiate its inclusion at all? What did you hope his point of view would add? Here's an example of Joe's input:

*I served with the Commandant, General Dunford, when he was the Regimental Combat Team Five commander back in 2003, then as his speechwriter in Afghanistan in 2013 for three months, then again for the first five months of his commandancy. He too was no help.*

*It was pretty clear to me that General Dunford wanted to keep*

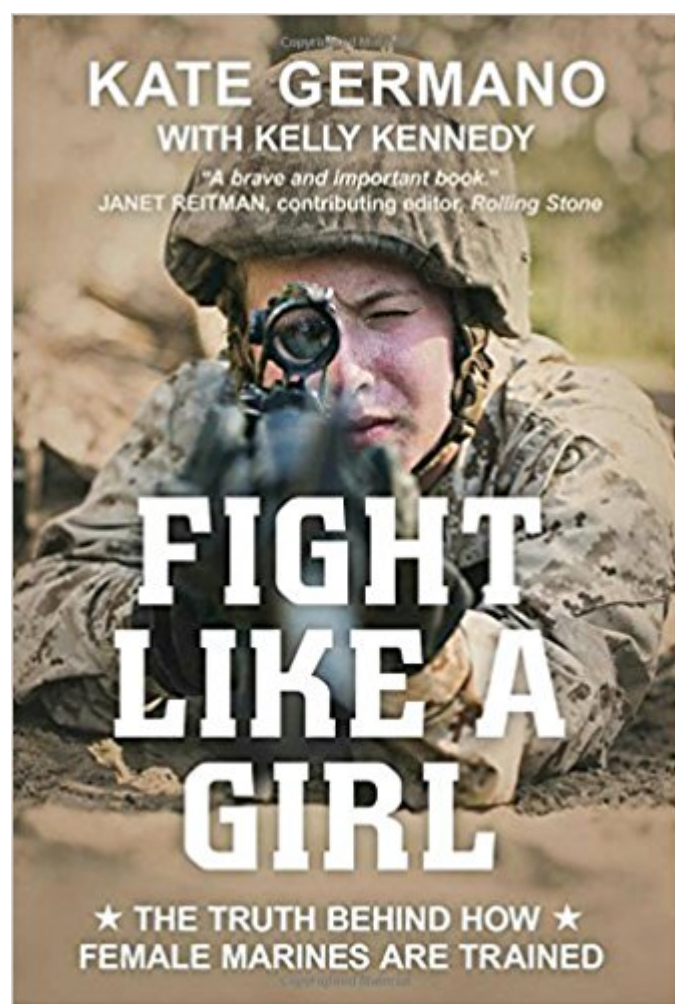
women out of the infantry at all costs. He was the only member of the joint chiefs (senior leaders of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and National Guard) to ask the secretary of defense for an exception to policy in September 2015 to keep women out of ground-combat arms jobs and units. That's one way of saying it. The other way is to say that he wanted to perpetuate the Marine Corps' policy of discriminating against women for some jobs based on their sex alone—regardless of whether or not they could meet the standards. His request made a lot of headlines because it placed him in direct opposition to his bosses, the Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus and Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, who were pushing for all jobs to be open to any person, male or female, who could meet the standards. Even more disappointing, when Dunford didn't get his way, he skipped the secretary of defense's press conference on December 3, 2015, announcing the policy change. It's practically a Pentagon tradition for both the secretary and his top general, the chairman of the joint chiefs, to attend together any press conferences announcing major policy changes.

In retrospect, it makes sense that the commandant would do nothing to ensure Kate's complaint about systemic gender bias was properly addressed. It's pretty evident that every advancement Kate made with her Marines at Fourth Battalion stripped away justifications for keeping women out of ground-combat arms jobs and eroded claims that women don't shoot as well, don't run as fast, and can't carry the same weight as their male counterparts.

*With every improvement to female performance, Kate was quashing critical elements of those arguments.*

**KK:** We didn't have to negotiate. I talked with Joe a couple of times to get some back story, and it started making sense to

have him there. There would be no book without Joe because he was at the Pentagon to hear all the background, so it was nice to get him in there as a primary source having heard those conversations. But they're also so different—Kate's type A, obviously, and Joe, while incredibly talented and aggressive, is much, much more laid-back. I think he helps people like Kate, which was important to me—that people see more of her personality. I mean, you kind of go into the book judging her. But I think Joe also helps us better understand how we should (or could) feel about her story, almost like he gives us permission to just be pissed.



MD: Kate's story is obviously an important one to tell. How do you feel about the role you played in ensuring that it has been told? Would you do this kind of project again? What advice would you give to others who are trying to tell their story in print?



**KK:** I'd definitely do it again. For whatever reason, I feel like we were the perfect team for this project—just our joint experiences fell in well together. I loved that we were able to include civilian and enlisted women, and I think some of that was me. My role, I think, was making sure that the Kate piece—the who she is a person piece—didn't get lost in the facts piece.

**MD:** Just after Shoshana's book came out, I received emails and phone calls from people who wanted me to help them write their stories. I imagine you are already receiving queries like that. I did end up doing one other co-authored memoir and seriously considered another but that project never came through. What would be your criteria for doing this again? What considerations would go into the decision?

**KK:** Some of that will be up to my agent, who believes I need to be careful at this point about choosing something that will allow me not to have to work a full-time job while writing a book full-time. I'm so glad I worked with Kate, but it was a labor of love for both of us. But also, I would need to believe in the truth of the story. At one point, Donald Trump's biographer came out and basically said, "I wrote this book for the money, and it's not truthful," and Kate said, "Oh my god. I don't know what I'd do if you felt that way." My response: "I wouldn't. I would never knowingly falsely represent someone." That still stands. That happened a lot as a journalist, too: "I saw the story you wrote today. I want you to write a story about me." You have to have some news judgment. I'm also finishing up a novel, so I don't feel like I'm in a huge hurry to start something new.

**MD:** Has Kate had any interaction with Haas or BG Williams or even Dunford, since all of this kicked off? Have they expressed any regret? (I thought Dunford's position was indefensible when he testified on the hill. It's even more ridiculous after reading Kate's book!) Does she ever worry that one of them will show up at a book signing?

**KK:** She has not. There is no response. It wasn't their story, and honestly, they've already had their say. They released Kate's investigation within 24 hours of her firing in an attempt to spin the media coverage. The investigation is still available online. I don't think she worries about them showing up—and no. No one has offered any regrets.

**MD:** While they may not have come out and said it, it appears the Marines have taken many if not most of Kate's suggestions and put them into practice. One small example is removal of the chairs that formerly were placed behind the women's platoons in case one of them needed to sit down for fear of fainting. Has the Marine Corps leadership acknowledged the role Germano played in making those changes?

**KK:** Nope. But last month, they started pushing stories about how boot camp doesn't need to be integrated because they're doing such a mighty-fine job of integrating it now—and it looks as if they've made some changes. But it's still not integrated at the battalion level.

**MD:** Is there anything you wanted to add that you wished I'd asked?

**KK:** This has been an odd project for me because I've usually stayed so far from a story I'm covering—I'm a journalist. This story was much more intimate, and I'm sure I could have stood back, but so many of the things she writes about have also happened to me or around me, or I've reported on them over the years, and so the story was important to me. In addition, I like her. She's become a dear friend, and I'm proud of her.

**MD:** You have every reason to be proud, of her, and of this project. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me, Kelly! I think this co-author/big story relationship is so important and not one that is fully understood. I'm hoping your book, along with discussions about how these types of co-authored relationships come together, will help others understand that



there are ways their stories can be preserved even if they can't write them themselves.

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*Fight Like a Girl* (Prometheus Books, April 2018) can be purchased at your local independent bookstore, [online](#), or anywhere books are sold.

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## An Interview with Taylor Brown, Author of *Gods of Howl Mountain*



**The Wrath-Bearing Tree** (Andria Williams): Taylor Brown is the author of a collection of short stories, [In the Season of Blood and Gold](#), and three novels: [Fallen Land](#), hailed by Booklist as “a masterpiece;” [The River of Kings](#), and [Gods of Howl Mountain](#), out next month (March 2018), of which a starred

*Booklist* review said:

*It's the characters, so wonderfully vibrant and alive in their all-too-human variety—scared, tightly wound, angry, damaged, yet resourceful and resilient, some honorable, some not—that demonstrate Brown's prodigious talent. Brown has quickly established himself in the top echelon of Southern writers.*

An [excerpt](#) from *Gods of Howl Mountain* appears in this month's issue of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

Thank you so much for answering our questions, Taylor.

Let's start with some background on *Gods of Howl Mountain*. The novel is set in rural North Carolina in the 1950s. Rory Docherty, a young man freshly home from the Korean War, has returned to the mountain where he grew up. He lives with his grandmother, a folk healer; his father is dead and his mother, mute since witnessing a terrible crime, has lived most of her life in a mental hospital nearby. Rory finds work running bootleg whiskey for a powerful local family. But when he falls for the daughter of a preacher, he gets himself into a new brand of trouble that may open up secrets about his mother and his past.

Begging my own Yankee ignorance here: Is there a Howl Mountain, North Carolina? How did you develop a fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains and its long legacy of family feuds, bootlegging, folk medicine, snake-handling, and more?

**Taylor Brown:** There is no Howl Mountain, North Carolina – the place and history are products of my own imagination. That said, I was inspired by the history and folklore of Blowing Rock, a town in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. The town itself is named after "The Blowing Rock," a rock formation that stands three thousand feet above the Johns River Gorge and is storied for a powerful wind that blows

upward out of the gorge. Legend has it, a heartbroken Native American brave leapt from the cliff, only to be blown back into the arms of his lover. That idea of mysterious winds inspired the cyclonic updrafts at the top of Howl Mountain, which I do envision as being in roughly the same area as Blowing Rock. However, I wanted to be free to create a geography and history of my own.

Though I grew up on the Georgia coast, I've long had a fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains, as well as the world of bootlegging, folk medicine, stock car racing, and more. As a child, I remember hearing my father play the song "Copperhead Road" by Steve Earle, still one of my favorite songs. The narrator is a Vietnam vet whose family has been involved in bootlegging for years, and who returns from Vietnam to begin growing the new cash crop of the region – marijuana. I can remember sitting in front of the stereo in my dad's study as a kid, playing that song over and over again.

Like most of my novels, *Gods of Howl Mountain* started with a short story. This time it was "Kingdom Come," the second story in my collection, *The Season of Blood and Gold*. With that story, I decided I wanted to write a novel set in this time and place. In fact, it was a large part of my motivation to move to western North Carolina in 2009, where I lived for two years—first in Asheville, then in Black Mountain, NC.

It's strange how organic these books become over the years. In 2013, I met Jason Frye, a writer who has become a great friend and editor of mine. Jason is from Logan, West Virginia, and his grandfather used to catch rattlesnakes to sell to the serpent-handling churches in the area. Jason has a black-and-white photograph of this one-armed snake-handling preacher on his office wall, and he directed me toward Dennis Covington's incredible book *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. Later, I ended up seeing someone who was in herb school in Asheville, and she was an incredible help for the specifics of Granny May's folks

medicine.

So, as you can see, this story has traveled quite a long road with me.

**WBT:** I can't help but notice that many of your novels and stories feature characters whose lives have bumped up against the vast movements of history and, in particular, war. There's Callum and Ava in *Fallen Land*, for example, caught up in General Sherman's "March to the Sea" in the final year of the American Civil War; or Lawton in *The River of Kings*, who's still grappling with the legacy of his recent service in ways that sometimes baffle or worry his college-student brother. In *Gods of Howl Mountain*, Rory is a Korean war vet and amputee, and you've mentioned that your newest work-in-progress features a female Army vet as well. Where do you think your attentiveness to veterans comes from—and your—what I would call—remarkably mature, long-range, compassionate interest in the ways war shapes whole generations, whole nations?

**TB:** That's a very good question, Andria. I've begun writing a little about my father, who was killed in a motorcycle accident last fall.

**WBT:** Yes, I remember that, and I am so sorry.

**TB:** He was of the Vietnam generation, and I grew up with stories of his time in the Army. For instance, he sent his 21st birthday on guard duty at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, marching through a hailstorm. Later, he graduated from the University of Georgia Law School and Army OCS at Fort Benning in the same year.

Fortunately, he was never sent to Vietnam, but the threat of war hovered over his entire early manhood, as it did over his entire generation's. He had so many friends who were impacted. One of his good friends, Sully, was a Green Beret in Vietnam, and I know my father was very moved by how the war has impacted his friend—the emotional and physical trauma. I

think, as a burgeoning writer, you're maybe especially attuned to such stories or emotions.

What's more, 9/11 took place during a very formative time for me: when the towers fell, I was a freshman in college—nineteen years old—and I knew my generation was going to war. The military was never an option for me, as I was born with bilateral club feet, which have necessitated a multitude of reconstructive surgeries. but so many of my friends had to consider their involvement (or lack thereof).

Of course, 9/11 kicked off the GWoT, so our nation has been at war for most of my adult life. I think it's easy for the average civilian to forget that; after all, so little of the general population has "skin in the game" these days. But, as a writer, I think your job is not to be incognizant or unaware of such things, you know? I think your job, in some part, is to try and empathize with the experiences and traumas of others, to put yourself in their shoes (or boots).

**WBT:** Yes!

In a "Writer's Bone" essay interview with Daniel Ford, you mentioned that you've written several stories based on old ballads, and that *Fallen Land* was inspired by an American ballad of Irish descent, "When First Unto This Country, A Stranger I Came" (Library of Congress Archives of American Folk Song #65A2). What is it about these ballads that speaks to you so strongly? Was there any particular music that inspired, or worked its way into, *Gods of Howl Mountain*?

And, as a fellow writer, I'm curious: Are you careful about the music you listen to when working intensely on a novel, the way some authors are careful about what they read? Do you have "sets" of music that have sort of accompanied each of your novels?

**TB:** Yes, as I mentioned before, I think Steve Earle's "Copperhead Road" certainly influenced this book—it's just a

song that's been big in my imagination since I was a kid. It's a modern ballad, really, and I love how it juxtaposes outlaws from two different generations. Steve Earle's "Johnny Come Lately" does much the same thing, exploring the vastly different homecomings of soldiers returning from WWII versus Vietnam.

**WBT:** I know that song! We had it on an old Farm Aid CD when I worked in rural political organizing. Steve Earle is a good guy – a big supporter of Farm Aid! And wow, that video really has the same feel as the opening of *Gods of Howl Mountain*. I can see how the tone of it worked its way into the novel.

**TB:** As for the old ballads like the one that inspired *Fallen Land*, I think there's something so timeless and visceral about them. These were songs of the people, sung again and again and again, the verses evolving over the decades. I think of those ballads as survivors, really. It's like natural selection—only the strongest songs survive century after century, migrating from old countries to new ones, from mountains to prairies to coasts. There must be a nugget of truth or beauty or power in these old songs that just won't die, that continue to move our hearts and blood.

I'm fairly careful about what I listen to when I'm actually sitting there writing. Often, it's music that doesn't have lyrics, or else I can't understand the lyrics well—I don't want to have other words in my head. Rather, it's the mood or atmosphere of certain songs that seems to help. Also, there's music that helps with certain projects, but not while I'm actually writing. For instance, I've been working on something that relates to motorcycles, and I've been playing various renditions of my favorite song of all time—"Vincent Black Lightning 1952"—on repeat.

Not surprisingly, it's another modern ballad.

**WBT:** You are thirty-five, and *Gods of Howl Mountain* is your fourth book. This just might make you the Leonardo DiCaprio of fiction writing! What is it like to have published "early and often?" In Virginia Woolf's "Letter to a Young Poet," she famously writes, "For heaven's sake, publish nothing before you are thirty." How would you respond to Ms. Woolf?

**TB:** Ha, sometimes I feel a lot older on the inside than I look on the outside! To be honest, though, I only had a few short stories published before I was thirty. It may seem like an "overnight success," but I spent the large part of a decade working in near isolation, writing and throwing away two novels before *Fallen Land*, as well as tons and tons of short stories. I really didn't know another serious writer until I was around thirty years old.

I've heard that Virginia Woolf quote before, and, I don't know—I think that sometimes writers use it as an excuse. Looking back at my early stories, there are some cringe-worthy moments, sure—and plenty of things I would do differently now—but I don't regret them. We only have so much time to express ourselves in this life, and early work shows us where we were then and how we've arrived where we are now. It's all part of the journey, I think.

**WBT:** I love that—"we only have so much time to express ourselves in this life."

This seems like a good time to ask if you have any advice for the even-younger poets (or fiction writers) out there, those who hope to make writing their life's work?

**TB:** I think Harry Crews said it best: "Get in the chair." There's really no secret but that. Desire, discipline, and force of will. And what did Calvin Coolidge say? "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence." I think that's as true of writing as it is for anything. It isn't going to be

easy. You're going to get knocked down again and again and again. You're going to have to write through shitty jobs and shattering heartbreaks and rejections. But that makes you tough—not just with writing, but in life.

I hear young writers whine sometimes because they got rejected from the hippest new lit journal. Fuck that. In my book, rejections are badges of honor. Paper your walls with them. Each is proof that you kept writing despite all the forces trying to keep you from making your art, and every rejection is one step closer to the glorious moment of publication. Every rejection makes that moment sweeter. So keep your chin up and keep swinging, and remember your heroes went through these same battles. If they didn't, you might want to find new ones.