

Conversations With American Women Writers

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What reader hasn't closed a book and wondered about the creative process that conceived it? Sarah Anne Johnson, a writer who teaches "The Art of the Author Interview" in M.F.A. programs at Bennington College and Lesley University, picks the brains of 17 diverse women writers to explore both the how and the why behind their works. Johnson's thoughtful and knowledgeable questions elicit new insights for readers and encouragement for aspiring writers, richly fulfilling her stated goal of supplementing previous interview collections that are either outdated or poorly representative of women's voices.

These "conversations," whether conducted in person, by phone, or by e-mail, skillfully avoid the trap of the formulaic one-size-fits-all survey, which would quickly become redundant in a compilation of this size. Though some fundamental inquiries recur, each interview is tailored to the themes, styles, and unique qualities of the writer. And Johnson does not allow these talks to become private chats accessible only to those who have read the works under discussion or who recognize the latest buzzwords of literary theory. Questions are fleshed out with enough summary or context to allow readers encountering an author for the first time to feel welcome.

Johnson's interviewees display similarities and striking differences. Though all write primarily literary short stories and novels, several mention being influenced by their backgrounds in poetry, theater, or music. They had previous careers ranging from special education teacher to psychotherapist to corrections officer to statistician. Many penned stories as small children, but a few began as adults, as did Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*), who wrote only after the cultural conflicts of immigration to the United States gave her a subject about which she felt passionate. The germination of their stories may start with a theme, a character's distinctive "voice," a news story, a striking opening line, or the desire to try a new writing technique. As Gish Jen (*Typical American* and *Mona in the Promised Land*) explains, "The world is full of nonsense; if you can use it more than it uses you, for a writer, it's a gift."

Almost all emphasize the importance of revision. For Ann Patchett (*Bel Canto* and *The Patron Saint of Liars*) that means planning the book in her head and then polishing each chapter before proceeding to the next. Others would agree with A.J. Verdelle (*The Good Negress*), who feels that

the draft is the time to turn on the dream—let the draft be fanciful, fully fictive, surreal if you want. Revision is when we get technical, crafty, practical, and require that every standing person have a floor beneath their feet.

Many acknowledge that they revise countless times and have discarded scores of pages or even entire novels.

Writing is presented here as an educational process, whereby the author learns from each new subject researched, each structural problem overcome, each emotion explored. For those like Sena Jeter Naslund (*Sherlock in Love* and *Ahab's Wife*), whose

fictional worlds require grounding in historical settings or technical details, "the challenge for a person who does research is to inhale so that it doesn't seem musty when you exhale," whether that breath gives life to 19th-century London or Nantucket in the heyday of whaling. The writers who teach workshops or M.F.A. classes learn from their students, and the interplay of styles and ideas pushes mentor and pupil to reach and grow.

Often these authors find that characters develop their own personalities or take the story in unexpected directions that cannot be ignored. Maria Flook (*Open Water* and *Family Night*) says:

I tell students who ask me if they should start a novel, "Hey, you don't start a novel, a novel starts you." Whether it's a story or a novel, it begins with a gnawing or pecking in your gut. A trouble wants out. The only way out is to get on the page.

And ultimately, the story will have its way, because the story is what matters. These women agree that writers must be willing to read voraciously, pay close attention to the complex world around them, and, most importantly, do the writing. When asked what she would say to new writers working on their first stories or novels, Patchett echoes many of her contemporaries here when she advises simply, "Finish them. That's a huge thing. ... Put business out of your mind and write because you love to write." ■

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