

Q and A: The Plain Sense of Things

Would you call *The Plain Sense of Things* a novel?

I set out to write a collection of related stories. I wanted to tell a big story that took place over decades and generations, but I wanted to drop down into specific moments in the history of a family without having to explain the before and after. A few people who've read the book—including Julia Alvarez who graciously wrote a blurb and the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*—have referred to it as a novel. I love the idea that the work may have morphed into something beyond my imagining. I am sure that if I had conceived of this book as a novel, I would not have written it the way that I did.

What was your process?

This book was shaped over a number of years. It started with the story "Pipe Dreams" which I wrote as a student in the MFA program at Hamline University. I got hooked on stories and on writing about Nebraska, the state where I spent my childhood. For my thesis, I wrote a collection of stories that included more stories about the Preston family plus other stories in which the family appeared as minor characters. The collection (titled *Listen for the Meadowlark*) won the Prose Thesis Prize when I graduated, but my readers said: "Either the family stories or the other stories, and we vote for the family." I spent the next year writing additional stories about the family. Then, after more readers and more revision, pulling some stories in, leaving others out, this book emerged.

What happened to those other stories?

Several of them have been published in literary journals. One of them, "Confessions," won the Tamarack Award sponsored by *Minnesota Monthly Magazine*. In some ways, they are stronger stand-alone stories because they were not so interdependent.

Do you prefer writing stories or novels?

I like both. They are different experiences. The short story is intense, more like an elongated poem, and that requires a focus and discipline that I find challenging. The novel affords more luxury to meander and embellish and bring in sub-plots and complications, and that's fun, too. The challenge with a novel is keeping all those threads weaving together.

Are these stories based on real people?

Yes and no. Isn't that the way it is with all fiction? More than some things I've written, these stories are inspired by my family and its history. I grew up hearing stories about my grandfather, for instance, although he died before I was born. The broad outlines of the story are my effort to bear witness to my family, who I think showed heroism and courage and abiding love. At the same time, I made up a ton of things, all the little details that carry the stories.

I think it must be strange to be close to a fiction writer. Readers assume your characters are your family, even when they aren't. A friend of mine wrote two books about an alcoholic mother, and her own mother said, "At least, it's not me." But my wise friend said, "Oh Mom, everyone assumes that it is you."

Then again, if your work is inspired by real people (as most fiction is, in one way or another) and you've made up a lot alongside it, that must be disconcerting for your friends and family, too. Someone could spend a lot of time trying to figure out what's factual and what isn't.

Jung said that we are all our dream characters, and the same is true of fictional characters. In the end, it's the writer who is exposed—it's my mind, my imaginings.

I hope the work stands on its own. I hope the stories convey something about what it means to be human and search for meaning and love. I think that's universal.

What were some of your early influences?

We lived in the country when I was young, so I didn't have access to a library. I read most anything I could get my hands on, my dad's *Field and Stream* magazines, my brothers' *Boy's Life*. I went to a one-room country grade school, and some of my teachers brought me books, things like the *Bobbsey Twins*. I only owned two books beyond picture books: a book of fairy tales rescued from the coal shed at our school and a *Bible*, King James version. I read both of them, and both were filled with great stories. I think the fairy tales fed my imagination, and the Bible stories encouraged me to look for meaning and grandeur. Plus, that King James English, the same language as Shakespeare, was a wonderful introduction to cadence and beauty.

Why do you write? What drives you?

I love language. I'm interested in ideas and relationships, and story moves me. But mostly, I write to teach myself compassion and empathy. I suppose those are the same reasons I read, but after being a life-long reader, I decided to try the work myself. Plus, there's a great satisfaction in creativity, striving toward patterns that are beautiful and true.

Who are your favorite authors?

There are a lot of wonderful books in the world. I've been known to weep in libraries because I won't have time to get to them all. Whoever I am reading right now becomes my favorite, so here's what I'm reading in July, 2008: Per Petterson's *Out Stealing Horses*; a fat anthology of short stories edited by Richard Ford called *American Short Stories*; a new book of poetry, *Milk and Tides*, by Margaret Hasse, a marvelous Minneapolis poet. I just finished reading *The Moon Is Down* by John Steinbeck, a book I did not know about until I was on a remote northern island with ten other people and a collection of 12,000 books.

What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

Read, read, read. And try to move through your life awake. Notice things. Be curious and interested in going beyond the surface.

Then, it's a matter of practice and perseverance.