

THE TURTLE CATCHER

A CONVERSATION WITH NICOLE HELGET

Q. Where did you come up with the idea for *The Turtle Catcher*?

A. My father, the first storyteller I ever knew, told me many stories. The heart of my novel was recollected from a story he once told me about a man with unnatural ways who was run into a swamp by his neighbors and forced to drown himself. I don't, of course, remember a lot of the details, but I remember that part, the forced drowning. I first wrote *The Turtle Catcher* as a short story and entered it in the Tamarack competition that has been run for many years by *Minnesota Monthly* magazine. They chose it as the winner, wrote me a big and generous check, and got me thinking, 'Hmm, I think I could do more with this story.' It wasn't easy. In the three-plus years it took me to expand the story into a novel, I finished my MFA degree in Creative Writing here in Mankato, taught some classes, mothered my children, became pregnant with my fourth child, separated and reunited with my now-husband, gave birth, and ran a marathon. And all that stuff in-between.



Q. Your first book, *The Summer of Ordinary Ways* was a memoir. What made you decide to write fiction this time around?

A. I don't know that I ever consciously chose non-fiction in the first place. People have said it's easier to publish non-fiction than fiction, and it may be true, but that never really figured into my writing of the memoir. When I first met Nate (my husband) I told him some of these things in my life that had happened growing up, and he told me, "You need to write that down!" So I did. Then I enrolled in a non-fiction workshop at MSU, Mankato, run by Roger Sheffer, and I wrote some more. The goal of the writing in those classes is to write something publishable, but I never dreamed my work would be published. So I was writing the best I could, and the students and the teacher in that class were most helpful to me. After writing that book, I wanted to try something different. I had never really written before, though I'd always read a lot. I'd read

a lot of novels, and loved them. Maybe I've always had *The Turtle Catcher* floating around in my imagination. I just made the conscious decision to try and grasp it. Some day I would love to be able to write poetry, too, but I'm not smart enough yet.

Q. What are some of your favorite books?

A. My first favorite book was *Les Miserables*. My eleventh grade teacher, Gigi, assigned it, and I fell in love. The idea that a man is innocent but found guilty is fascinating to me, and terrifying. I think that story has a strong human connection, and I like stories like that. Faulkner made an early impression on me, his use of language. *As I Lay Dying* is a favorite. I was entranced by Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, and I got into reading some more multi-cultural literature when I took classes from some of the teachers in Mankato. One of my favorite books of all time is Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. All the characters in that book, and his control with them,

is amazing, and maybe a reason I wrote in the multitude of characters in *The Turtle Catcher*. Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* was a revelation, as was Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. Dennis Johnson's novella *Train Dreams* is a favorite of mine and my husband's.

Q. Your novel can be labeled as historical fiction. How and why have you gone about writing in this style?

A. I didn't go into writing *The Turtle Catcher* thinking, 'This is going to be historical fiction!' I went into it with the notion of this forced suicide by drowning, and then details started filling themselves in. Such an act doesn't seem as likely in this day an age, for whatever reason. If someone, or a group of people, were trying to get rid of someone else, they'd just be more blunt about it. Guns make violence too easy these days, and although guns were around in the early 1900s, when my story is set, I don't think there was the rush to pull the trigger and blast away so frivolously then.

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Maybe that's why I put it in the past. And the whole turtle catcher thing—I don't know. It just came to me. It's strange, I know. My daughter, who is twelve and a big reader, has sampled some of the novel and is constantly asking me why a character did this or that, and I'm constantly telling her, "Child, I don't know."

Q. The storyline of your book bears resemblance to some of the United States's problems, post-9/11. Is this intentional?

A. The disadvantage of writing fiction is having to consistently invent things and remember what you've invented. Inventing takes more work than simply remembering. Inventing takes a lot of imagination. But therein lies the advantage of writing fiction. Getting lost in one's imagination, whether it's in inventing a story or reading the story of another's imagination, transports the mind away from reality, and that's a really nice break sometimes. I appreciate inventors, and I appreciate reading or hearing or watching or smelling or tasting other people's creations. I suppose I've always wanted to add my inventions to the mix in this world. The most productive societies in this world have encouraged inventions, have encouraged creativity, but it's always cyclically being threatened. America has fostered invention and creativity historically, and in many ways I think that's been the best thing about our country. It's been the reason we've garnered the world's attention and respect. But it's being threatened. I hope we can face down these threats. I hope we can strive for clarity instead of muddying, for invention and genuine ingenuity instead of fear mongering and limitation. Electing Barack Obama as America's new president was a wonderful start. My storyline bears resemblance to some of the problems now in the United States, some of the problems of the United States in the early 1900s, and some of the problems of nations who have gotten too full of themselves throughout history. It is intentional.

Q. You include, similarly to as in your memoir, baseball in your novel. What is it about baseball that makes you want to write about it?

A. There's a little baseball in this novel. I think baseball, and all sports, are great for bringing people together, and I thought the town in my novel could use a little of that. My husband wishes there was more baseball in the novel, because he says he likes how I write about it. A lot of times, when we're watching the Twins on TV, or another sporting event like basketball or football, he'll ask me to describe what I see, and then laugh at what I say. I don't know if he's making fun of me or if he's just entertained or what. But I know I could never write seriously about any sport except baseball, because I don't know the rules of the other sports enough. I was brought up washing my dad's baseball stirrups and helping him find his misplaced mitt or cup. He would be scratching out baseball stats on my homework. We went to all his town games. It's what we did in the summer in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, in the 1980s. I played some softball in high school, though it's a different game than baseball. I played all the positions and pitched some. I threw very fast but had no control. I was good for about three batters and then I lost it.

Q. Some early reviews have called your novel "melancholy." Does this bother you?

A. No. It is melancholy. But it's more than that, I think. I was hesitant to agree with a few of my first readers' sentiments that this was a sort of love story, though I've changed my mind some on that. *The Turtle Catcher* has about five romantic relationships in it. Overall, some are tragic, some are melancholy, and some are hopeful, but I think it's a mistake to try to be overly reductive about them. The relationship between Lester and Liesel, for example, is tragic, lustful, misbegotten, and hopeful, among other labels. I think romantic relationships are hard, and I don't know of many that aren't occasionally tinged with melancholy. I know mine have been. So, no, the word "melancholy" doesn't really bother me. I think readers may find the novel engaging, occasionally hopeful, and even humorous, too. They will if I succeed in what I set out to accomplish, at least.

