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AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH GUEST

Jill VanAntwerp

I met Judith Guest in Harrisville, my hometown and a place rich with her family history. Our first half-hour was spent admiring the Bed and Breakfast where I was staying. It is a unique home, designed in 1929 by a wealthy Chicago furniture maker's widow who tried to bring a touch of Spain to this small Lake Huron town in northern Michigan. Guest was fascinated by the history of the home and quizzed the owner on many details. This, perhaps, is the first thing to mention about Judith Guest. She takes a great interest in the past and especially in the past of this town in which her family has spent summers for generations.

Judith Guest was born in Detroit and graduated from the University of Michigan with a BA in Education. She has taught grade school in Royal Oak and Birmingham, Michigan. Her first novel, *Ordinary People*, was published by Viking and won the Janet Heidegger Kafka Prize in 1976. It was made into a movie that won the Academy Award for best picture in 1980. *Second Heaven* was selected as one of *School Library Journal's* Best Books for Young Adults. Her third novel, *Killing Time in St. Cloud*, was written with novelist Rebecca Hill and published in 1988. Ballantine published *Errands*, her fourth novel, in 1997. She is currently at work on two novels as once, one a sequel to *Second Heaven*, tentatively titled *Don't Be Too Sure*, and the other, a mystery, *The Tarnished Eye*. Guest and her husband have three married sons and seven grandchildren, who, she reports, are all voracious readers ("even the 14 month old"). She divides her

time between her homes in Minnesota and Michigan.

Harrisville is the setting for Guest's novel *Errands*, and my familiarity with the setting of *Errands* added visual and emotional layers to my reading of the novel that contributed immeasurably to my involvement and empathy with the characters. In contrast, even though Guest's first novel, *Ordinary People*, is one of my favorites, peopled with characters I've never forgotten, I find its suburban Chicago setting easily forgettable and have to refer back to the novel to remind myself where the family lived. When I revealed this to Guest, her reaction was, "You should sort of forget, I think. I think that's OK, that you forget. In *Ordinary People*, it had to be that kind of community because of the code: you keep up appearances. That book should have been set in Detroit. I didn't have the nerve to set it in Detroit because it was my first novel and I was afraid."

How important, then, is place to a novel, to the author as she writes, to the reader as she reads? I asked Guest to talk about her writing and the importance of place as she creates and writes. What follows are some of her thoughts as we talked about her writing for a few hours in a Spanish sitting room on a sunny summer morning in Harrisville.

* * *

That's the most important thing to me, what I write about . . . the place that I'm writing about, I have to have been to this place, and it has to be a

place that is emotionally important to me or I struggle, I really struggle. And like writing *Errands* about Harrisville, I had no struggle with that, and when I edited that book, my editor finally said, "Way too much stuff about place." So I went through, and I thought, "This is important to me but I'll leave this out, I'll leave this out, I'll leave this out," and then I got to the Lumberman's Monument and I thought, "No way, that is in this book, the Lumberman's Monument." I drag my kids there, we just went there yesterday, and my son always goes, "Oh, yeah, it's time for the Lumberman's Monument." It's definitely a tradition, and I take pictures of everybody so I have pictures of kids when they were two and when they were four and when they were eight.

But then I realize I wrote a book called *Second Heaven* and a third of that book took place in a juvenile home, and I thought, "Well that's not true then that I only write about places where I've been because I've never been to one." When I first started writing those scenes, I thought, "I don't know what this is like . . . this is hard to do. I think I'll have to go to a place first and see it," and then I thought, "That's just a big excuse for not writing this scene, Judy, just write the scene, imagine what you think it's like and write the scene and then you can contact somebody and go back and take a look at it and see if it fits, and if it doesn't fit then you can change those details, no big deal." So I did that, I wrote all those scenes never having been there. My cousin's husband is a lawyer who knows a lot of judges, and he introduced me to a judge, and I told the judge that I wanted to do just a quick tour of these places and see what they are like. He said, "Sure, fine," and so I went, and amazingly they were just like how I had written about it. It worked. I don't know [if that is the best way].

I think that I have two things that are really important to me and one is the people that I am writing about and the other is the context, the place where they are . . .

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where they are, and place seems very, very important to me, personally. My grandfather loved this place [Harrisville]. Actually he died up here. He died up here and they shipped his body home from the depot on the train. My great aunt and my grandmother wrote letters every day that came on the train, and we have all those letters, these exchanges the summer that he was so sick. My aunt is telling my grandmother all the things that are going on at home. They had to rent their house and the renters were very nice people and they are taking care of the lawn and they are doing this . . . and my grandmother is telling her about Harry and how sick he is and also telling her that things are going to be so much better when they get home. They get home in September and he can rest, and that was the whole object of coming up here was so he could get better! And so it is very apparent that she is in complete denial that he is dying, yet it is so clear by the letters that he is dying, the doctor is coming in.

He will have the whole summer to rest and he will take off from work and he'll just rest . . . and he got sicker and sicker and sicker. They got here on the 21st of June and he died on the 4th of August, so really, it wasn't very long. But in August she is writing her sister every day saying, "I think in September we'll come back home and he'll be better." It's very sad. They [the letters] are very sad to read. They only surfaced about fifteen years ago. My grandmother saved them and she died and left them with my great aunt and my great aunt left them with my uncle. Then he died and they sat in the basement for years, and then my aunt cleaned the basement and she found this huge box of journals and letters. It was just an amazing find, and I read them one night.

I was up here. I started reading and I couldn't stop reading. Everybody else went to bed, and I'm sitting up and I'm reading and it is like three o'clock in the morning. And I read this one letter that was so sad about how she is so worried about him and he doesn't seem to be getting better, and then I turn that letter over and here's a telegram from my aunt and I know what it is, it's the telegram saying, "I heard. He died. I'll be up there tomorrow morning," and it was so shocking. I just went. "Oh." It was like I was experiencing it almost, like it was that fast. In the back of my mind I al-

ways knew I was going to have to write about this place and write about my experiences in this place and write about that history that we all know about how Grandpa came up here.

They had five children and one of her sisters came with her four children, so there were nine children and one woman in a cottage taking care of them and my grandmother taking care of my grandfather in the other cottage. My dad says he had no idea that his dad was dying. He said, "I'd go in, I'd go fishing at the Mill Pond, and I'd come into his room and show him my fish and we'd talk about my fish." So that scene is in the book, [*Errands*], too, because that seemed really important to me, that story that my dad told. It is one of the few solid memories that my dad has of his dad. He said, "I had no idea what was going on. I knew he was in bed every day, and I knew he was sick, but I didn't know he was dying." I mean my grandmother was in complete denial, she certainly isn't going to be saying things to her kids. So it was a big shock to my dad, and yet there aren't a lot of memories, there are just the facts. So what I wanted to do with that novel was to create the emotional context which there was so little of. By the time I was born, my grandfather had been dead for thirteen years. He was very much a person in my life because they all talked about him.

I have a lot of trouble with the line between fiction and nonfiction. I don't get the distinction. I don't even think there really is a distinction. Your whole life is fiction anyway.

When I found those letters was when I decided that this was going to be a novel. I knew it was a novel [I would write], I knew it was fiction, I kept trying to think, "I've got to know how he really felt, I've got to know all of this stuff, and how am I going to know this?" And when I read those letters, I thought, "There is no way that I can recreate this moment in time. It has already been done with these letters. There is no way that I can better this. This is the best." I thought, "OK this is a novel, this is the seed of a novel, and I'm going with it the way I need to go." And that is what I did. There is a lot in it that is—I don't like to say the truth because I do feel that fiction is the truth. I remember an inter-

view with a guy who said, "I don't read fiction, I just read stuff that is true." I was so mad at him.

I find that in the classes I teach that students will say that they can't change scenes because what they wrote really happened. But they can, they can change anything that they want. I tell them sometimes that it doesn't feel like it really happened. I have a lot of trouble with the line between fiction and nonfiction. I don't get the distinction. I don't even think there really is a distinction. Your whole life is fiction anyway. It is how you are thinking of it. And then you sit down with your sister and say, "Remember the night we did . . ." and she says, "That isn't what happened, we didn't do that." Everything is subjective; it is how you are viewing it, so from that point of view, it really is fiction.

The other decision I had [to make concerning *Errands*] was when to set it. If I was going to write about that time, the twenties, then I had better have a pretty good grasp on the twenties. I would have had to do a ton of research, and I am not interested in that kind of research. I'm basically interested in the emotional content of what goes on. That's the way I feel in my life and that's the way I feel when I'm writing. That's where my interest lies. I would have to spend so much time researching stuff that doesn't even really matter to me. That's when I said, "Modern day. I know modern day. I am living in modern day. I can do modern day." It's a tricky time thing that you have to get past in your mind. But I think it is a false barrier. I don't think it matters that much. Material things change, but emotions don't change. That novel is a mixture. There are old things in that novel and new things.

I am working on a mystery novel now, and I felt stuck because there is a detective in it and he goes to work every day. He works with various people at his job and I'm thinking, "What does he do at work all day if he is not detecting," and I just felt stuck. I felt like I couldn't go on, so I did go and interview [the sheriff in Harrisville] and he was great. He took me all around, and he introduced me to everybody, and he told me what everybody's job was. That's all I needed, I hardly even needed to talk to him, I needed to see what it looked like, a policeman's office, and I asked him, "What do you do all day?" [and he gave me an idea of his duties] . . . it was just so much clearer, and then you can write from

that because it is so much easier and you [can imagine] what they would be saying to each other.

I'm in a tricky time zone right now with another novel that I'm working on. I'm working on two novels at the same time. It's not hard. I always thought for years that it was going to be really hard. But it's not hard, because I realized that's the way I write anyway. I never write linearly. In the early stages of a novel, I get up and think, "What do I feel like writing about today. Well I know this is going to happen. I'm not sure where it is going to happen, but I know it is going to happen, and I feel like writing about that, so I'll write about that incident." And then I'll write on that maybe for a week until I feel like I've got something, and then I think, "OK now this morning I feel like writing about these other two people in this situation. I don't even know what relation this scene has with this scene—does it come before or does it come after?—but I know both these scenes are going to be in this book so I'll just write them." And then it's almost like you develop these little islands and then they grow to a certain size and then you say, "Well this has to be after" and then you start doing the connectors. It's like a puzzle.

Now the novel I'm working on is a sequel to a novel I wrote in 1982, *Second Heaven*, the one about the kid that was in the juvenile home. I never was finished with that character. I actually felt like that book ended where this kid's life was about to begin, but it was a very natural place for closure. He was rescued by this woman and her friend and was invited to move in with them and establish a new family that was completely separate from his actual family. And I knew . . . I remember there was one review saying, "You know, she is so naive. She writes this book and now they're going to live happily ever after," and I think, "No way they are going to live happily ever after. This is how he starts all over." And over the years I've never been able to forget about him, and I have lots and lots of incidents that happened between him and his new mother and his new father. And of course, his new father was a divorced man with kids of his own, and one of those kids was his own age and I thought, "There is going to be lots of conflict in there," which there is, and it is so fun to write about.

But the time problem is [that] there is an actual

time problem and there is a fictional time problem. The actual time problem is that I wrote that novel in 1982 and in 1982 this kid was sixteen years old, and now I am finally getting around to writing about him and it is eighteen years later and according to that he would be in his thirties. But he is not, he is 23. But I decided it is a false problem. This is their life and you are writing it and so you are writing it in 2000, but you are writing it about when it happens, so don't worry about it, but it's tricky, it gets in the way all the time, and I have to keep pushing it back and saying this doesn't matter, this doesn't matter.

I'm constantly sifting through the experience I've already had to try to milk it for everything that's in it.

It is set in the Detroit area. They are living in the house that she bought after she got her divorce and was fixing up, and he [her friend] helps her fix it up, but something else is going to happen there with another place and that isn't clear to me yet. I don't exactly know where they are going to go. They are probably going to come up here [to Harrisville]. He is very interested in getting away from the lawyer business and moving up to a place that is more . . . closer to nature.

I felt that about my own life. Some people's lives there is a lot of it spent in reflection. Years spent in reflection. It is like there is enough that happens in your life in a little tiny period to keep you going and thinking about it for the rest of your life. And I think that's sort of how I operate. I know it isn't the way other people operate. All other people don't operate that way, I mean other people are constantly looking for new experiences. I'm constantly sifting through the experience I've already had to try to milk it for everything that's in it. To me that's really fascinating and to other people that would be so boring. That would not even be like living because, "Hey why don't you get out and do it instead of sitting there thinking about it?" But I think it is partly because I live so much in my head. I realize that I live more in my head than a lot of people do. It's comfortable for me there. This summer [my husband and I] are having a tug of war about whether we are going to go to Europe, and I have a feeling

that I am in a place and the object of life is get to know this place better and better and better and better. He is always saying, "Let's go to Italy," and I say, "Yeah, we could do that, but I'd really just like to go to Harrisville," and I know he thinks it is crazy, but there is something about it, there is sort of like a steeping that goes on. I do feel like I know it better and better every year I come here.

What is uncomfortable is having too many sensations coming in. I can't cope with them. I can't sort them out. I can't just let it wash over me and say, "Boy is this great!" I can't do it. It feels like something else has to happen to that material for me to really enjoy it and to like it. I feel like I suffer from sensation overload if I do too much stuff all at once instead of being able to reflect on it.

The important thing about learning who you are is accepting how you are and not feeling like you should be like these other people who are not like that. I think it is one of the most difficult concepts for humans to realize that people are all different and that's OK that they are all different. It makes life so much richer because everyone doesn't feel that same way and everyone doesn't think the same and everyone doesn't do their homework the same way. The best teachers are the ones who recognize that the most and try to bring out the differences and celebrate the differences and recognize them saying, "Isn't this kid unusual because he does this." I think it is a hard road for teachers because a certain amount of stuff has to be objectively done. And if you spend all of your time sort of letting kids go their own way, who is going to teach them while I am celebrating their differences. But I think it is one of the most important things you teach, that it is OK that I am different.

The title of *Ordinary People* came from a line of dialogue early on when I was writing it where the grandmother says to the father, "How do these kinds of things happen to ordinary people?" And soon after I wrote that line of dialogue, I kept coming back to it and thinking, "You know that's a good title," so it started out being *To Ordinary People*. And then, after a while I looked at it and said, "What's that 'to' doing there? *Ordinary People* is fine, we don't need the 'to.'" I was really married to that title and liked it and felt like it was very accurate. And the first thing Viking told me was, "We don't

like this title," and they said, "Here's why we don't like it. We think this book has great potential for sales among young people. Young people do not like to think of themselves as ordinary people. So could you come up with another title?" They were very nice, they didn't say, "So, we are going to call it this." So I spent a whole weekend thinking of a bunch of stupid, pretentious, dumb, unworkable titles. And the more I thought about it, the more I thought that my instincts were right. But this is my first novel, and this is the first publishing company that has ever been interested in anything that I'm doing. So, I'm nervous. I thought, "I have got to come up with a good long list of reasons," so I did, I came up with about thirty reasons. I wrote a letter, a three-page letter. And they just said, "OK, alright." I got several letters from people saying, "I don't understand where you are coming from with this title. Because, obviously these people lived in a very wealthy suburb of Chicago. They aren't ordinary people, they are very wealthy people." And I was interested that that's how they made the distinction, that you were poor and ordinary. I think that what I was trying for there was all our lives. You can have money or you can have no money, and you still have things happen to you, good things or bad things. And you still deal with them the same way, you have to figure out how you are going to survive this incident in your life, and it doesn't make any difference if you have money. Money isn't going to change anything.

I think what I was trying to write about in that novel was how pointless it is to keep up appearances because everyone is keeping up appearances, so you don't know anyone and what is really going on in their lives.

I think people want to put up this barrier and say this could never happen because I am not that kind of mother, because blah blah blah . . . when in truth bad things happen. I think what I was trying to write about in that novel was how pointless it is to keep up appearances because everyone is keeping up appearances, so you don't know anyone and what is really going on in their lives. "Everyone makes mistakes, just like me, everyone makes mistakes, and so we work together to get

past that and I can go on my own and be OK even if my parents aren't handling it." It's the crucial lesson to graduate to maturity and it is a very, very difficult lesson to learn. And then a lot of kids get thrown into a situation like that or a divorce or whatever all of these regular things that happen in people's lives, and then you are just forced to grow up. You are just thrown into water and you better grow up quick or you are going to drown. You are going to stay stuck right where you are until you let yourself think about it or feel about it and it is hard and it is hard to do and some kids don't get any choice. A big important thing happens, and it is right there in your face, and you have got to deal with it. And other kids are lucky, they have got all through their lives with no truly bad things happening, and then you get to be an adult and things start to happen. That's what people can't bear—they have done everything right and then this bad thing happened.

In the novel that I am writing now, Gale my hero has decided that the way you resolve bad stuff in your past is you just completely repress it. "That was the past and now here's my new life. This is my new life that I am living, and I'm a completely different person, and I do this and I do that. I am a good student, and I'm going to make a living, and I'm going to do all this stuff." But the past just doesn't go away and every time it comes back, because he's chosen this method, he's just completely thrown by it. And I know that's what the core of this novel is about, how the secret is integration, that you have to say, "This was me in the past, this was my life, this is part of my life, and it has to be integrated with my present." You can't just turn your back on it and walk away from it because it was so ugly and so bad. So that's sort of what happens in this novel with these two seventy-year-olds. You can't ignore the past. If that is what you are trying to do, it will be hanging on you like a tin can on a dog's tail. The image I always have in my mind is you are marching down the road, you are marching down the road. "Oh," you see this thing. "Ok, I'll make a right turn here," and you go this way and you go this way for awhile, and guess what, you see this thing and it is exactly like this one right here. You cannot get away from that stuff, you must deal with your issues and get through them or they will

just haunt you, haunt you.

* * *

As a glance at her watch brought Judith Guest's thoughts back to the reality of time and schedules, and we prepared to part, I realized how far we had traveled that afternoon though still in the warmth of the sitting room. I cannot neatly sum up all I heard as her thoughts wound from one topic to another despite the anchor of "Place," but what I come back to in my memory of that interview without listening to my tape or reading my notes is that the appeal of Judith Guest's novels is the way they touch that place where we all live, the way they say what we are all thinking. The paradox is that while place is necessary for Guest to evoke emotional content as she writes, these external settings matter only because she is able to use them to reach internal locations—both in her characters and her readers. Whether we live in a wealthy Chicago suburb or a small northern town like Harrisville, in all our different places, we are the same ordinary people facing life's extraordinary unpredictability.

About the Author

Jill VanAntwerp, co-editor of the LAJM, teaches English Education courses at GVSU. A member of MCTE and NCTE, she is a frequent conference presenter.