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## Meet Marin Sardy, MALS '07

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## **Meet Marin Sardy, MALS '07**

**Author of *The Edge of Every Day: Sketches of Schizophrenia***

### ***In conversation with Sabine Hoskinson***

When MALS alumna Marin Sardy and I connected over the phone in April, we talked first about cell phone area codes and how they can catch us off guard. She was confused by my 650 California area code—expecting the Hanover 603—but subsequently admitted that she too still has her Santa Fe area code, even though she hasn't lived there in ten years. Marin then talked about how she bounced around the country her whole adult life: from ecological bird studies in Alaska to MALS at Dartmouth; from Dartmouth to Santa Fe to work as a magazine editor, art critic, and cultural journalist; Santa Fe to New York City for an MFA in Nonfiction at Columbia, and then New York to Tucson, Arizona. Marin was in Tucson as we talked about the forthcoming publication of her first book this spring and the writer's journey that has brought her here. Marin's book, *The Edge of Every Day: Sketches of Schizophrenia*, is an essayistic memoir about schizophrenia and its impact on her and her family, in particular its effects on her mother and brother. The book draws heavily on interdisciplinary research and personal family history and utilizes a nonlinear, non-traditional form of narrative. I spoke with Marin about her time at MALS and the key role it played in transforming her from a scientist who loved literature into a professional writer:

### **What brought you to MALS?**

I received my undergraduate degree in Biology, particularly Ecology, at University of Oregon and I wanted to become a scientist. I went back to Alaska where I'm from and worked for five years with US Fish and Wildlife and other organizations on bird studies. But then I did a pivot. At some point I realized I didn't want to become a scientist; it wasn't for me. I had never taken a creative writing class in my life, but I had always been the nerd who read really thick novels. I feel like every writer can relate to that. So, I felt an increasing tug to explore writing because I was getting more verbose in my own journals and I wanted to find out what I could do with that.

Having never taken Creative Writing, I didn't know what kind of writing I wanted to do; I didn't even know what genre. With a science background, I felt that my basic knowledge of the humanities had a lot of holes in it and MALS really appealed to me because I could fill in those holes, like with Don Pease's strong cultural studies courses. I took one of each kind of [creative writing] workshop—Non-Fiction, Fiction, Poetry—and by the end I wrote a novel for my thesis.

### **Was there any particular part of your time at MALS that especially set you up for the process of writing a book and getting published?**

It was probably the community I found in other students and the ways we were able to support each other and stimulate each other's ideas. I had come from a world where I was surrounded by scientists and scientists think in a very particular way. And that's not to say that they were disconnected from the world – many of them were quite politically involved—but they didn't think much about the histories of ideas in terms of humanities or philosophy in terms of placing

what we were discovering in science in a human context. I was really hungry for that and so when I got to MALS and all the other students in the program were thinking of exactly those things, and we were encouraged to think deeply and critically and in complex ways, it finally satisfied my hunger.

**Can you describe your MALS thesis a bit?**

A novel about three young women characters and their relationship to the state of Alaska. All three characters were in some way composites based in part on me and my sisters. I was exploring three different perspectives on being a young Alaskan woman, particularly around the issues of feminism and differences I saw in the way women were expected to be in the context of Alaska as the last frontier as opposed to the context of Dartmouth, the long-established ivory tower. I was struck by those differences and wanted to explore them in greater depth. I also included a character who was having pretty serious mental health problems in the realm of schizophrenia. Looking back, I think I really wanted to write about schizophrenia but did not know how yet. I could not figure out how to put it on the page. I see in that novel me starting to try. It was part of my process of eventually getting to where I could write about schizophrenia in ways that were effective on the page.

**Your current book draws on the interdisciplinary mode of thinking and writing that you established during your time at MALS. Can you talk a little bit about that?**

My book melds science with a style of writing that is literary. Just having been in MALS was enough to give me the confidence that I could try that. As I explored schizophrenia, I didn't stick strictly to what science can tell us. I got a lot into the phenomenology of delusions and what it's like to inhabit psychosis. And those are philosophical questions. The intellectual approaches and readings that we did at MALS helped with that. While I didn't specifically study anything related to schizophrenia, I was reading Dierot and Judith Butler, and those thinkers informed this book ten years later.

**I'd love to talk a bit more about your book, so that our readers can learn about your process and journey. How was this book born?**

I went into my MFA program not intending to write a memoir about schizophrenia. I had been learning a lot about schizophrenia previously and had been participating in activism and had done some short creative projects around it, but I thought that I was going to write about other topics. But by the end of my first semester, I found that everything I sat down to write moved to schizophrenia; no matter what I did, I ended up there. And I feel extremely grateful to my professors and to my workshop peers because I don't know if I would have been able to figure out how to get it off the ground on my own. I could not understand how to bridge the gap between my experiences and communicating it to someone who knew nothing about it. One of my professors sat down with me and said, "you can do this; and people want you to succeed. We will help you." And that was what I needed.

**At what point in the writing process did you come to the non-traditional literary style of this book?**

I don't think I knew what form the book was going to take until it took it, which was only about a year ago. I had started out thinking I was going to write a linear narrative that focused primarily on growing up with my mother's schizophrenia. I did a lot of research and interviewed my mother's siblings, friends, and my grandmother when she was still alive. But I kept being sidetracked by things that I thought were fascinating but didn't fit into this linear narrative idea. So, I thought, I'll just write a spinoff essay, and I kept writing these spinoffs while trying to construct the narrative of my mom and my life with her. Eventually, and uneasily, I felt that I liked them more than the narrative. The narrative, however, was so fruitful in generating these spinoff essays that I kept going with it and started getting the essays published. There was a point in which I thought I was writing two books at once: a central linear narrative and an essay collection of all these musings.

Then my agent sent out the narrative book and it didn't sell. It came extremely close to selling and then it didn't, which was a huge letdown for me. I didn't know what to do and decided to keep working on finishing that manuscript to try again to sell it. I returned to the process of writing the two books, but then my brother died. That was like a bomb exploding in the middle of my life. I couldn't keep going in the direction I had been going on so many levels. It required me to stop and deal with my grief. I couldn't write for quite some time and then when I did try, I realized I couldn't go back to the narrative book. I would open the document and stare at it and feel words washing over me in a tidal wave and then I would close it again. I asked myself: what can I do? I want to be writing. So, I started writing more essays all relating to schizophrenia in some way. I kept publishing those and eventually I had enough for a collection. I put together a proposal and submitted the collection for a Greywolf prize. I didn't win—in fact, that year Esmé Weijun Wang won for *The Collective Schizophrenias*—but because I had already put together the proposal, my agent sent it out to other publishers in New York.

In the Non-Fiction world, it's sort of understood that you don't give your agent an essay collection to shop around to the big New York publishing houses. If you want to publish an essay collection you've got to do it with a small print or University publisher. It had never even occurred to me that I should do this. And remarkably two publishers were interested. One of them wanted to break apart the essays and rework them to become a memoir. The other said: what do *you think* about breaking apart these essays to make it more like a memoir? And I said: *I think these essays are really tightly constructed and they have a certain energy that comes from the way they're put together. I'm afraid that if I broke them apart they would lose their potency.* And the publisher said she saw my point and asked what I thought about adding in some more connective tissue. I agreed. She wanted to position it as a memoir; it would still be highly fragmented, but we would call it a memoir. And that was Pantheon and they bought the book.

**Do you have a favorite chapter or section of your book?**

My favorites are all parts that I wrote in the last year and a half: the parts about my brother in which I finally say something enormous that had been stewing inside of me. The very short chapter “Ulima Thule,” which is the one that articulates the underlying logic of the book, is one of my favorites. It’s also the logic of the way I think about my whole life. I also really like the chapter “Mr. Rain Jacket” because I was able to get into the difficulties and complexities related to not just how my brother was surviving out in the world, but how he was confronted by people whose fears and prejudices related to schizophrenia were so overwhelmingly destructive. I really wanted to say something about that in the book, about the extreme damage that stigmatization and discrimination of people with schizophrenia does to them in their lives.

**Any advice you would have wanted to hear as a student that you now know from your whole experience?**

One thing that I didn’t know is that so much of what kind of success you have as a writer comes down to who you know. That’s not to say that the people who get success don’t deserve it, but the whole system functions on this level of other people vouching for your abilities. It’s very personal on some level. My friend who is a writer who knows this person can tell this person that I’m a good writer and they believe her because they trust her ability to know what’s good. Part of why I went to grad school to get my MFA in New York is because I wanted to place myself in the publishing industry and be there physically to have those kinds of connections. And that worked. So, one piece of advice is: go to New York—if that turns out to be a viable option. I’m not guaranteeing anything, but it worked for me.

Use the connections you have. At MALS, I made wonderful connections. Nurture your relationships with your peers, with your fellow writers, and with your mentors. Take them seriously and be part of a community because that community and those connections are so much of how you can end up meeting the editor who ends up wanting to buy your book.

Marin Sardy’s book *The Edge of Every Day: Sketches of Schizophrenia* will be available for purchase in late Spring 2019. For information on her book and speaking events, visit <https://www.marinsardy.com>.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*