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Pleasures of Fiction

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The Pleasures of Fiction: An Interview with Mary Elizabeth Pope

Mary Elizabeth Pope lives in Boston, where she is a professor at Emmanuel College. Originally from the Midwest, she has degrees from Central Michigan University and University of Iowa. Her work has appeared in many publications such as *The Florida Review*, *Sycamore Review*, *Ascent*, *Upstreet*, and *poemmemoirstory*.

Her short story collection, *Divining Venus*, will be published by Waywiser Press. The stories in *Divining Venus* all feature characters that learn something about love, whether it is familial or romantic. A number of the stories from *Divining Venus* look at friendships between girls or young women, an age that many overlook or ridicule. However, this is only one aspect of her collection—the stories also examine love from the perspective of adults, and in the case of “The Drill,” even the elderly. Whether young or old, Pope’s characters are often perplexed and surprised by what they discover about love, which rarely seems to manifest itself the way they expect. This collection invites us to examine ourselves as well. For instance, Josie, the protagonist of “Marionette Theatre,” vacationing in Prague with her fiancé, comes to understand how little she wants to marry this man. Similarly, we as readers are compelled to evaluate our own wishes and desires. Do we really know what we want?

Following her visit to Geneseo, Pope was kind enough to answer some questions regarding *Divining Venus* and writing in general.

GD Editors: When speaking about your debut short story collection, *Divining Venus*, you've mentioned that in all of the stories, the protagonist discovers something true about love. At what point did you realize that there was a common thread? Was it something intentional or did it coalesce naturally?

Mary Elizabeth Pope: The first short story I ever wrote was called "Junior Life-saving" which is the story of a strong female protagonist who tries to conceal her competence from a man who is threatened by her strength in order to save their relationship. I had no idea at the time I wrote it that it was the beginning of a story collection. Then I wrote another story called "Rebound" about a woman who enters into a relationship with her own grief after a break-up, and that was followed by what is now the title story for the collection, "Divining Venus."

It was as I was searching for a title for the third story, which deals with that moment when children pass from childhood into adolescence that I realized the title "Divining Venus" might work as the title for a whole collection. By that point, I had a backlog of other stories I wanted to write, and it was then that I realized they all had the common thread of love or friendship in them. So that's where the idea for the collection coalesced.

GD: After reading a few of your short stories, we noticed that your narrators are often wildly different, yet their voices always feel true to their age. Are there any specific challenges in writing stories with child narrators? Which narrator did you have the most difficulty writing?

MEP: The protagonists in *Divining Venus* range in age from eleven to eighty-something. The older voices were easier—it's not difficult to imagine writing from the perspective of someone who has more life experience than you do, especially if you've spent a lot of time listening to your parents or grandparents, or ever worked in a nursing home, as I did for a few summers in graduate school. However, the child voices are more difficult. Sophie's voice in "Divining Venus" was the hardest child-narrated story I've written, primarily because I was keenly aware of the triple burden on each sentence to develop not only the protagonist's character but also the other characters in the story through a child's perspective, while at the same time moving the whole plot forward. This is always true when writing in first-person point of view, but it was more complicated in this case because of the age of the narrator. It was especially tricky at moments when I wanted to reveal things to the reader that the narrator didn't understand even though she was telling the story.

It does help that I have a pretty vivid memory of the mortifying experience of adolescence. I always tell my students that anyone who survived junior high has enough material to write for the rest of their lives, and those memories served me well as I wrote both "Divining Venus" and "The Club."

GD: When you read at Geneseo, you mentioned that you used to write cre-

ative non-fiction exclusively, but have recently started writing fiction. What prompted this change? Why do you think there is a trend of fiction writers turning to non-fiction?

MEP: It's true that I began my writing career in creative nonfiction, and while I haven't moved away from it, at some point, because I am an academic, I had to make a choice about a book. *Divining Venus* happened to be coming together at the point I had to make a decision, so I chose to go in that direction.

My move into fiction was prompted by a discussion I had with my creative dissertation advisor, who did not believe that second person point of view could be used in nonfiction (I've since discovered that many nonfiction writers use it). However, I really wanted to try my hand at second person, so when I began writing "Junior Lifesaving" in second person, I felt incredibly freed from the restrictions of writing about things that actually happened to me. I think most writers of creative nonfiction have all reached a point where they've been tempted to exaggerate for effect, where they think, "Wouldn't it be great if *this* had happened?" But because *this* didn't actually happen, they can't go in that direction. The freedom I experienced writing that first piece of fiction was really intriguing to me, and I wanted to explore it more.

I think the growing trend of fiction writers turning to non-fiction might have something to do with the fact that contemporary fiction writers have at some point been given the impression that their real lives are off limits as material, because using their own experiences as material somehow diminishes the imaginative value of the work. I'm not sure what the genesis of this belief was, because we know Ernest Hemingway based Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* on his nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky, and we've seen that photograph of the characters from *The Sun Also Rises* sitting around that table in Pamplona. So if I had to guess why fiction writers are turning to creative nonfiction, I'd say it's a result of the fact that personal experience has recently become acceptable again as an art form.

GD: What is one short story or novel that you wish you had written. Why?

MEP: My favorite novel is Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. I wish I'd written it because Lily Bart is such an appealing protagonist in spite of her unlikable qualities. She's so mesmerizing and sympathetic that I find myself hoping that she'll make better choices every time I read it, and I've read it more times than I can count.

My favorite short story is harder to name, so I'll name a few: Kurt Vonnegut's "Go Back to Your Precious Wife and Son" and "Who Am I This Time?" from *Welcome to the Monkey House*, Louise Erdrich's "Plunge of the Brave" and "Love Medicine" from *Love Medicine*, and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" from *Gorilla, My Love*. I wish I'd written them all because they manage to take serious subject matter and infuse it with comedy, which always allows me to go

more deeply into the darkness of a story.

However, the work I most wish I'd written is actually a poetry collection called *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters. It's about a cemetery in Petersburg, Illinois, and each poem is told from the perspective of someone buried there. Masters manages to whittle down each character's entire life into just a few lines that speak to a defining moment—her greatest pride, his missed opportunity—as seen from the perspective of the grave, and it's an incredibly moving technique. I credit him with my love for first-person narrators, which includes the stories I mentioned by Vonnegut, Erdrich and Bambara.

GD: What are you working on now? How do you find time for your own writing while keeping up with your work as a professor?

MEP: Currently I'm working on a novel set in Arkansas in the 1940s which is based on my father's relationship with his father, who ginned cotton for a living. My father's mother was ultimately committed to an asylum for what we'd now call paranoid schizophrenia, which left my grandfather to raise my father alone. The novel takes these parameters as its basic set-up, and is ultimately told from the perspective of a man trying to shepherd his child through poverty and insanity and chance to adulthood, back in the days when men were not usually primary caregivers. It's a story that compels me because although my grandfather died 38 years ago, my father still cannot mention his name without crying, the love and gratitude and loss is still so fresh for him. As his child, I've never been able to look away from that.

My grandfather died when I was three, however, and my father's accent has disappeared after a 30-year career as a professor at Central Michigan University, so I've had to rely on the voices of my late uncles who migrated north on the "hillbilly pipeline" for jobs in the auto industry in Detroit to construct the voice of my grandfather. There was a simplicity and directness about the way they spoke that was beautiful in its lack of sophistication. I think highly educated people are very skilled at using language to evade ever talking about anything at all, whereas my uncles, with their limited vocabulary, always got right to the point.

As for balancing writing and my work as a professor, all I can say is that it's not easy. Teaching creative writing does give me the opportunity to stay engaged with writing itself, and sometimes I'll be trying to help a student figure something out in his or her story and realize I've just solved a problem I've been having in my own writing. However, there's just no getting around the urgency of prepping and teaching and grading. I know some writers have a system—they get up every morning at five o'clock and write for two hours before they go teach or something like that—but I've found that kind of rigidity difficult to sustain, so I have no such system. I work when I can, mostly in the summer, and I don't give up.