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An Interview with Karin Lin-Greenberg

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An Interview with Karin Lin-Greenberg

Karin Lin-Greenberg earned her MFA from the University of Pittsburgh, an MA from Temple University, as well as an AB from Bryn Mawr College. Her short story collection, *Faulty Predictions*, was the winner of the 2013 Flannery O'Connor Award in Short Fiction from the University of Georgia Press. Her stories can also be found in literary journals such as *The Antioch Review, Bellevue Literary Review,* and the *Berkeley Fiction Review*. She is currently an assistant professor at Siena College, where she teaches creative writing.

ERIN KOEHLER: We think the title *Faulty Predictions* encompasses the entire collection well. Can you talk about how you determined the collection's title?

KARIN LIN-GREENBERG: I wanted the book's title to be the title of one of the stories in the collection. I looked at all the titles and thought about whether there was one title that could encompass the themes and ideas in the entire collection, and I decided "Faulty Predictions" made the most sense. In each of the stories, characters set out with a particular set of expectations, and by the end, their "predictions" about their lives are turned upside-down. Generally, the characters learn or understand something about their own lives by the end of the story that they didn't know at the beginning. Usually, something they didn't expect to happen occurs over the course of the story.

AMY ELIZABETH BISHOP: The settings in *Faulty Predictions* are diverse— from Ohio to Illinois to Kansas, North Carolina, from college towns to big cities. How did you choose the settings for your stories? And how important is setting to you as a writer?

KLG: The settings are all places where I've lived or imagined towns that are similar to places I've lived. I've moved a lot in the last decade, and I wanted to incorporate each place I lived in my fiction. Some sense of setting is always important for me. I tell my students that we need to know a general sense of where things are taking place; if we don't know, we often get scenes where characters are talking to each other, and readers can't picture where the characters are. I've heard this called Talking Head Syndrome. In some of the stories in the collection, like "Bread," I don't specify a particular setting because place isn't a terribly important element of the story. However, we know that some scenes are set in the protagonist's house, others in a car, and others in a grocery store. In other stories, like "Miller Duskman's Mistakes," setting is incredibly important. I think in that story setting drives the plot in many ways. I taught for three years in a small town in Ohio that was very similar to the imaginary Morningstar, Ohio, of "Miller Duskman's Mistakes." The only outsiders in the real-life version of Morningstar were the people who came to teach at the college. I wanted to capture a sense of what it felt like to be an outsider in a small town, and I wanted to come up with a character who might be perceived as even more of an intruder than the academics who came to teach at the college. I thought a character who tore down an established business in Morningstar and opened a restaurant that was very out of place in this town could create some active dislike from the people who'd lived in the town their entire lives.

EK: The characters in your collection are unique, quirky, even, yet they feel very real too. We especially loved the characters in "Miller Duskman's Mistakes" and this small town perspective. Are your characters often born out of real life experiences, people you know, or do they come to you in other ways?

KLG: Mostly my characters are imagined. They might be sparked by something that happened in real life or something that I observed or read or heard about, but for the most part I like to make up characters from scratch. I don't think I've ever written a character that's completely based on either myself or someone I know. I might take one or two traits from real life people, but I'd say about ninety to ninety-five percent of each character I write comes from imagination.

AEB: Character names seem important in your stories. In "Prized Possessions," in particular, names are meaningful. How do you choose character names?

KLG: I'm mostly concerned with names matching who the characters are. I think about the ages of the characters and where they live and the time period in which the story takes place, and I try to choose names that feel right. I often find myself writing near bookshelves filled with books, so when I'm stuck

for a character name I'll look at the spines and the names of the authors and a lot of the time my eyes will rest upon either a first name or a last name that seems to fit the character I'm writing. Sometimes I'll just do a Google search for something like "Most popular last names in North Carolina in 1990" and see what comes up. Sometimes I'll poke around on baby name websites, but I don't care too much about the meanings of the names; for me, these websites are just a way to scroll through lots of names. I generally try not to use names that are symbolic, but in "Prized Possessions" I believed the characters would name their twins Hope and Chance. So that was more of a decision to characterize the parents than to have these kids stand for these abstract ideas.

EK: A number of the conflicts in your stories take place within families or in friendships, which can be fraught in similar ways. In "The Good Brother," for instance, adult siblings, who are thrown together for a surprising errand, come to understand each other. In the title story, Hazel and the narrator reach a similar moment of understanding. In "Prized Possessions," there is resolution for the protagonist in both her family and her friendship. Can you talk about writing these moments and the role of humor in them?

KLG: I think the humor often arises from the situations the characters are in. What's important for me in stories is to have two things going on, an upper story and a lower story. The upper story is simply where stuff happens. Sometimes people call this the actual plot. I try to be aware of making sure there's enough going on in scene in my stories. I ask myself whether characters are doing things, whether they're talking to each other, whether they're in conflict in some way with each other. I want to make sure they're not just sitting around thinking and pontificating. The lower story is where there's some sort of emotional resonance to the stuff that happens in the story, and this can also be called the emotional plot. So the upper story is where the humor happens in action, but the lower story is where there are moments of understanding and resolution.

AEB: The stories in *Faulty Predictions* are told in a variety of points of view. "Editorial Decisions," begins the collection with the first person plural, and you use first and third limited elsewhere. How do you choose POV?

KLG: For me, point of view is generally attached to character. If I'm working with a character with a distinct voice, I'll usually gravitate toward first person. In "Editorial Decisions" I had a group of characters who were all thinking and acting in the same way, so I thought first person plural made sense as a way to tell this story. I think about second person as a distancing point of view, sort of like a displaced first person. I generally don't think of it as a point of view that puts the reader in the character's shoes. I chose second person narration for "Designated Driver" because I thought the protagonist would have a hard time telling the story in first person. It's easier for her to not quite take

responsibility for her missteps and instead push these actions onto a "you" character.

EK: There's a lot of action in these stories—people going places, seeking out other characters or things, getting injured, etc. What types of scenes are most difficult for you to write, and which comes the most naturally?

KLG: First drafts of any sort of scene are always difficult for me. I tend to overwrite and indulge in tangents, and then in revision I cut away and keep only what's important. I like the revision process a whole lot more than I like the process of getting the first draft of the story down. I enjoy writing dialogue, but I find in revision I can usually cut away at least half of the dialogue I initially wrote, which tightens up the subsequent drafts.

AEB: Your collection won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction in 2013. Can you talk about the process of putting together a collection? Did you submit *Faulty Predictions* to other contests?

KLG: I started submitting a collection of stories to contests for book-length collections starting in 2006, when I graduated from my MFA program. We had to complete a manuscript as a final project, and my manuscript was a collection of stories. After I graduated, I submitted the stories that I wrote during my MFA to contests, but I was also writing new stories. I kept submitting to contests every year, and each year I would take out some of the older stories and swap in newer stories. I think the collection got stronger over the years as I kept working and writing and swapping out stories. In 2009 I was a finalist for the Flannery O'Connor, which gave me a lot of hope and encouraged me to keep going even though by that point I'd gotten dozens of rejections for the collection. By the time the collection won in 2013, it probably looked about ninety percent different from the collection I started submitting in 2006. "Faulty Predictions" itself was written in 2012, so it was a really new story. Actually, three of the stories, "Faulty Predictions," "Late Night With Brad Mack," and "Half and Half Club" were all written within a few months before I submitted the collection in May. Those are the three stories in the collection that weren't first published in journals because they were so new that I didn't have time to get them published before the book went to press.

I learned a lot over the years about putting together a collection. At first, I thought that if a story had been published in a journal it belonged in the collection. So for many years I submitted collections that I don't think held together thematically or in terms of voice or tone. Then I started thinking about collections as a whole and studying collections I liked. Even if the stories in these collections were about different kinds of characters and were set in a variety of places, they generally all felt like they belonged together in some way. So I got rid of some stories from my collection that didn't fit in with the other stories. These were mainly stories that were more driven by voice than

by character or plot and also some stories where I was more concerned with lyrical language than plot. In this collection that I submitted in 2013, I tried to include stories that felt tonally similar and had some humor to them, even if they were about serious topics.

AEB: We're struck by the story about "Prized Possessions" being rejected numerous times before winding up in the prestigious journal *Epoch*. How do you know when to push on with a story and how do you know when to give up?

KLG: A big issue with "Prized Possessions" was that I submitted it too early. It was a story I was excited about, and I'd written multiple drafts of it and just couldn't wait to submit it. It really wasn't finished yet; I still had a lot of things to figure out with it, and I should have gone through a few more drafts before sending it out. I'm a lot more patient now as a submitter; I'm willing to put a story down for a while and revisit it before I send it out. "Prized Possessions" is the oldest story in the collection, and it started as an exercise in a class I took in graduate school. I think I often submitted work too early while I was a student.

Ultimately, figuring out when to push forward and when to quit has a lot to do with how much I believe in the story. And, maybe more importantly, whether I can stand to keep working on it. I've worked on some stories for five or six years before they got published (of course this isn't steady work, but rather returning to the stories every few months). I think it's also important to take another look at a story that's been rejected a lot of times and see if I can figure out whether there's something that's simply not working with the story. And, if I can figure this out, the next step is seeing if I can figure out how to revise what's not working. If I'm really lucky, some kind editors might jot down a few notes about why they rejected the story, and if I find that several of the notes say similar things, that might also help to lead me to what to revise.

EK: What are you working on currently?

KLG: I'm currently working on a bunch of things. I've been writing stories set in upstate New York that I hope will one day work together in a collection. I had fun putting together a collection that jumps around in terms of settings, but I'm now interested in writing a more cohesive collection. I'm also working on a novel that grapples with the question of what it means to be successful. And since I teach these genres and am constantly reading and thinking about them, I'm also writing some poetry and some creative nonfiction.