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Nancy Schoenberger

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Living like the Grasshopper

*an interview with Nancy Schoenberger
with an introduction by Bronwyn G. Pughe*

Nancy Schoenberger is the author of the *TAXIDERMIST'S DAUGHTER* (Calliopea Press, 1979), which won the initial Montana Arts Council "First Book Award". (Her book is currently distributed by Graywolf Press, Port Townsend, WA.) She has had poems in numerous national publications including a recent feature in *The American Poetry Review*. Ms. Schoenberger is the recipient of a 1984 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship; August and September, 1984 Residencies at Centrum, Port Townsend, Washington; and will be spending February, 1985 at the Rockefeller Foundation Study and Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy.



*Nancy Schoenberger
Photo by Joan Graff*

Ms. Schoenberger received her M.A. from Louisiana State University and her M.F.A. from Columbia University where she was co-editor of *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry and Prose*. Like most writers, Nancy has also put in her time in fast food chains, cocktailng, and reading to blind students. More notably, she has taught Freshman Composition at the University of Montana, taught Poetry-In-The-Schools in Montana, and worked for an independent producer on a documentary series on poets for public television at the Center for Visual History. Ms. Schoenberger was an associate producer for the pilot film on Ezra Pound. She currently teaches a workshop at and runs the book awards program for the Academy of American Poets (AAP) in New York City.

Like many authors, Nancy Schoenberger draws on her childhood memories as well as her present experiences and insights for her work. She says her second collection of poems, *GIRL ON A WHITE PORCH*, "draws on my Southern background, something that continues to engage me the longer I live outside of the South."

* * * * *

Five years ago, you made a major move from the Northwest, Missoula to be precise, to the East Coast, just as your first book, THE TAXIDERMIST'S DAUGHTER, was coming out. Your first book was published after being chosen for the Montana First Book Award. You were also a Poet-In-The-Schools in Montana, taught as an instructor at the University and taught a center course in poetry to the general public. Some critics look at your first book as falling under the Northwest school. Do you feel this is fair?

SCHOENBERGER: I wrote most of the poems in THE TAXIDERMIST'S DAUGHTER while I was living in Missoula, and of course, no one writing in that area at the time could escape the seductive presence of Richard Hugo. I didn't study with Hugo (though I wish that I had), but I feel as though I absorbed by osmosis some of Hugo's precepts and methods: his ability to create character, to tell a story, to evoke a place strongly enough to express a whole attitude and philosophy. In his case, it was one of despair and longing, which is always beautiful and seductive in verse (Joseph Brodsky has said, "The language wants to be tragic.") I have tried to do these things in my own work—with what success I can't say. (That's for others to determine.)

This is a huge country without any real "national" poet or poetry (not since Whitman), so it makes sense that poetry flares up in regions. I was influenced by the Northwest, but I don't identify with it, nor do I identify with "East Coast" poets, a region that enjoys a certain stamp of acceptance and visibility because so much of the machinery of the literary world is in New York and Boston: publishers, agents, grant-making and other literary institutions. One of the things I have tried to do at the Academy of American Poets in New York City is to bring poets from other regions to New York for the benefits of mutual exposure. This year I am proud to say, we're sponsoring a festival of Northwest poets and a festival of Southern poets and I hope that, by doing this, we can establish an ongoing series of regional programs in New York. I think the division will always be there, and I think that's okay (as long as they are divisions and not barriers). After all, who wants a homogenized poetry that appeals to all people? The country is already becoming too homogenized, one town looking exactly like the next with its shopping malls and Burger Kings, etc. It's the specialness and specificity of a place that can nourish the imagination. Look what Faulkner did with Mississippi, or Flannery O'Connor with Georgia, or Frost with New England, or Hugo with the Northwest, for that matter. To those regional poets who feel shunned by the East Coast establishment (and that would include 80% of all poets, probably) I

say, create your own awards. Of course, this is already happening to some degree, with state arts council grants, but I would love to see foundations like the Academy or the Poetry Society springing up in other parts of the country. New York is a grant marketplace, but we all know the work has to have value outside the marketplace, and other schemes should be devised to note and appreciate its value.

Did the exposure of your first book help your career or your move? What about the exposure as a back cover feature in A.P.R.?

SCHOENBERGER: Alas, my book was never really “exposed.” It was a limited edition to begin with, and then it simply was not distributed very widely, not at all on the East coast. And, since I left the Northwest just when the book came out, it was sort of a non-event for me. I hope that doesn’t happen again. Regarding the APR back cover, I did get a couple of fan letters, but I think they liked my picture better than they liked my poems.

Did your work change due to your move?

SCHOENBERGER: Hmm, my work changed when I moved to New York in that I was exposed to Eastern European writers by studying with Joseph Brodsky and later with Derek Walcott, whose Cribbean poems turned on a light for me (not to mention his virtuosity of craft and language). I realized I could write about what I loved, what drew me, and not just about the immediate sea I was swimming in. That was a revelation—you can write about what you love and about the things that delight you, once you discover what they are.

Other than yourself, who do you see as other up and coming or important contemporary poets and why?

SCHOENBERGER: The contemporary poets I read with the most enthusiasm are all women poets: Gjertrud Schackenberg, Elizabeth Spires, Louise Gluck, and Elizabeth Weber (whom I knew in Montana and who also won a “First Book Award” for SMALL MERCIES, a beautiful and persuasive book).

You have spent this past year traveling, to Italy and to South America, and doing various residencies in Port Townsend, Italy, etc., and pretty much living off of your N.E.A. grant. Has this particular grant helped you to obtain others? And, has living in New York helped with contacts towards being able to live and work as a writer?

SCHOENBERGER: Hmm, interesting questions. First—I would have to say, no. I don't think the NEA has helped me get other grants. Maybe the Rockefeller Foundation residency—It's hard to say, as I did apply to that one after receiving the NEA, which was not the case with the Port Townsend residency. But I've been living like the grasshopper and not the ant; that is, making art and not storing up for the winter, so I haven't been applying for further grants during the past year, except for the Bellagio residency (Rockefeller Foundation) which seemed like a gift from heaven. A friend told me about it and urged me to apply—I had never even heard of it.

What do you feel is in store for other writers and yourself in light of the current governmental trends?

SCHOENBERGER: There has been a lot of panic regarding the possible drying up of funds for the arts, due to Reagan's philistine conservatism, but I haven't personally seen this happen *yet*. The next round of NEA fellowships for writers offers \$20,000 grants but this could change a few years down the road as Reagan's attitudes become more entrenched. I really can't say. I have heard, unofficially, that literature grants may be cut by as much as 35% in the near future, which seems very possible. Time to retrench, to do what writers have always had to do, figure out a way to live, and write, too. It doesn't look good.

Has being a woman writer made a difference?

SCHOENBERGER: I don't think being a woman writer has made a difference in my case in terms of attracting grants and residencies—I haven't made that an issue in my own work or in the presentation of my work, although I admire several women writers who have. There are periodicals and agencies that are interested in promoting women's literature per se, which is a good thing, but I haven't gone that route. I suppose I have

benefited from the efforts of women writers in this country to be heard and to be taken seriously, and I add my voice as another part of the ever-increasing stream. I happen to think that the most interesting poets writing today are women, though I don't know *why* that is so. Perhaps it's all that stored-up energy bursting out after centuries of silence.

Do you plan to stay in New York? I know when you left Missoula you planned to complete your MFA at Columbia and then were open. Now you've been in NYC for nearly five years.

SCHOENBERGER: I didn't intend to stay in New York City, and I still don't think of it as "home". But after a certain age it becomes very hard to move, to support oneself. I would like to divide my time between New York and Louisiana. I love to travel, and New York is a good place to travel from.

Has the experience of working as an editor on the Columbia literary magazine affected your work?

SCHOENBERGER: Yes, in that it sharpens your eyes and it makes you more impatient with work that falls short—that's competently written but has no spark or daring, which is always the great bulk of what's submitted (and published!) anywhere, at any time. It makes me impatient with the mediocre work of others and also impatient with my own work.

What direction are you taking in your work now?

SCHOENBERGER: More of the same—trying to discover and immerse myself in my "roots"—an odd thing for a woman who grew up moving every 2 years of her life as a child. I am very drawn to tropical, sensual landscapes. I guess I am a sensualist. I like big, splayed and dripping flowers and tumultuous rivers. I like the heat.

You have a second book completed, GIRL ON A WHITE PORCH, and making the rounds. What are its prospects, if you can reveal them?

SCHOENBERGER: I really can't say right now what its prospects are.

Would you tell us something about the book?

SCHOENBERGER: GIRL ON A WHITE PORCH, draws on my Southern background, something that continues to engage me the longer I live outside of the South. I try to return to New Orleans at least once a year, where my mother's family still lives. I was a Navy brat, but I spent summers in Louisiana going between New Orleans and the DEEP South of Buras, Louisiana, Cajun country. I just returned from a trip to the Amazonian basin and I kept thinking while I was there, why, this is just like Buras, Louisiana! As a child, it seemed pagan, rich, oppressive and alive to me. Like the Amazon. The Mississippi is also a wild and legendary river.

Do you have plans for a third book? Do you plan to try for foreign publication since you will be spending more time abroad?

SCHOENBERGER: Nothing begun at this point for a third book, though I do think it will be rooted even more ostensibly in the South than the second manuscript, which includes some work inspired by the Northwest, and a section on Italian painting. I would like to spend more time in Louisiana and I would like very much to return to the Amazon, though I don't know if that's possible at this point. For some reason, I find the climate and landscape evocative, nourishing.

What attracted you to living and working in the Italian culture? What is different about being a writer in this culture and in particular an American woman poet?

SCHOENBERGER: I am sorry to say I don't have a good answer to this one—nothing really. My month in Bellagio in February will probably be spent writing poems about being a little girl in the South. I did spend a month travelling through Italy, and, like any tourist, I loved it and was inspired by the Renaissance paintings, frescoes, and sculpture. I did a series of short poems with the title "Galleria" describing several of my favorites: Fra Filippo Lippi's "Madonna with the Child and the Angel," Beato Angelico's "Annunciation," a stunning fresco by Bartole di Fredi,

"The Creation of Man." A tourist's admiration, I'm afraid. I am delighted to be going back, especially since Bellagio is a place of extreme beauty, but I'm not a student of Italian culture nor of the Renaissance, and I really can't comment on contemporary writers in Italy. I suspect that North America is the best country to be writing in at this particular time in history—after all, one can go to college and study to write poems, and even get a degree in it! All one lacks is an audience! The poet has enjoyed tremendous respect in the Soviet Union in this century, and still does; the poet isn't necessarily respected here, nor listened to, but he/she is allowed to continue, and may even be encouraged by an occasional grant or fan letter. I have gotten two (fan letters). On the other hand, getting a degree in "Creative Writing" imparts a false sense of respectability and acceptance. We're kidding ourselves; to seriously undertake the writing of poetry, which has little or no value in the market place, is a slightly mad act. The old guard poets are perhaps rightly suspicious of the "Creative Writers." Still, one *can* find some nourishment by taking classes and meeting with other writers, and I do think that's a good thing, rare in the world.

You have taught creative writing among other things. Could you comment on poets and academia, i.e., how does the situation effect the quality of your work, the impetus to work, the amount of your own work you are able to get done? Would you like to or would you consider teaching again?

SCHOENBERGER: I haven't taught in an academic setting for some years now, since leaving the University of Montana, although I teach a workshop now at the AAP, which is a nonprofit arts organization that offers several programs for a poetry audience. I love teaching—small, select groups of course! and it certainly can help in one's own work, in that it can clarify ones own ideas and tastes in literature. The danger lies in substituting the satisfactions of teaching and talking about literature for writing itself. Because I only teach three to four classes a year now (ten week classes), this is less of a problem. I think being a full-academic is a mixed blessing: you have, usually, a fairly congenial work schedule, at least part of your duties involve talking about the things you love or at least like, you have a certain legitimacy as a writer or scholar. But as everyone knows who's been involved with academia, the politics, the professional jealousies, the emotional drain of teaching a heavy class load, the sequestered nature of working within an institution can all have a numbing effect. I think I'm fortunate to be able to teach on a part-time basis, and work on other pro-

grams on a part-time basis, which leaves me a few extra days a week for my own work. And time to travel, which is very important to me. Again, there's no formula, at least as I've been able to figure, for the right way to make a living if one is also a writer. I just keep trying different things to keep the writing life alive, and to pay the rent.

How does place, where you live and work and where you have lived and worked, affect the content of your poems? Does the notion of expatriation enter into it? It is a part of our history and present as many writers, including yourself, choose to live abroad for both brief and extended periods of time.

SCHOENBERGER: In a sense, I have chosen to live in an area I consider alien to my sense of roots, my sense of place, which, as I have described earlier, is caught up with the notion of deep South. I say notion because my idea of it is mixed up with early childhood memories, my experience of living in Louisiana for seven years as a very young woman, my impression on short trips back South: an amalgam of memories, truths, and myths. It's not the South I would evoke if I were living there. I think if I lived there again the *place* would be consumed in the business of daily life; its mythic qualities would be lost. So in a sense being separated from a thing that you love can add to its mystery and beauty. If being an expatriate means essentially being cut-off, then I think it can affect and enhance the writing, the recollecting of the experience, of the place. I think the faculties of memory and imagination are very close—one flows into the other so easily. C. P. Cavafy is very eloquent on this point, particularly when the memory is an erotic one as in his poem. . . .

BODY, REMEMBER. . . .

Body, remember not only how much you were loved,
not only the beds you lay on,
but also those desires glowing openly
in eyes that looked at you,
trembling for you in voices—
only some chance obstacle frustrated them.
Now that it's all finally in the past,
it seems almost as if you gave yourself
to those desires too—how they glowed,
remember, in eyes that looked at you,
remember, body, how they trembled for you in those voices.

C. P. Cavafy, Collected Poems; Translated by
Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherard; Edited by
George Savadis; Princeton University Press,
1975.

Some writers with a marvelous eye are very good at describing what is directly in front of them; I prefer to begin in a nebula of memory and invention.

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This interview was conducted by mail and phone between Nancy Schoenberger and Bronwyn G. Pughe.