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Joy Wilson

## An Interview With Michelle Richmond

Michelle Richmond is the author of the novel *Dream of the Blue Room* and the story collection *The Girl in the Fall-Away Dress*, which won the Associated Writing Programs Award for Short Fiction. She grew up on Alabama's Gulf Coast, then settled in Northern California. She currently teaches in the MFA Program in Writing at the University of San Francisco, edits the online literary journal *Fiction Attic*, and serves on the Advisory Board of the Isherwood Foundation. Michelle holds an MFA from the University of Miami, where she was a James Michener Fellow. She is the recipient of a Walter E. Dakin Fellowship, as well as residency grants from the Millay Colony for the Arts, the Saltonstall Foundation, Hedgebrook, and The Julia and David White Artists' Colony in Costa Rica. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *CutBank*, *Other Voices*, *Salon.com*, *7x7*, *Travelers' Tales*, and elsewhere. She is spending the Spring 2004 semester as Distinguished Visiting Writer at Bowling Green State University.

*In "The World's Greatest Pants," from your short-story collection The Girl in the Fall-Away Dress, characterization depends on dialogue, especially in the father. The scene is really set by what is being said, rather than felt or seen. Is this where you start with a story, typically? Do characters usually present themselves to you first?*

I often do begin a story with a situation between two or more characters. But many of my stories have developed out of a single image ("The Girl in the Fall-Away Dress," for example) or a phrase. For "The World's Greatest Pants," I began with situation: an elder sister leaving home with her lesbian partner. The characters were already in place, because the book centers on four sisters growing up in Alabama. This was one of the last stories I wrote, and by then I knew all four of the sisters pretty well.

I wanted the story to be very short and to show the awkwardness, as well the sadness, of a parting moment between a daughter who is desperate to leave and parents who don't want to let go. But I also wanted the story to have a celebratory feel—which is where the narrator, Gracie, comes in. She admires her sister Darlene's ability to leave, and she even finds herself somewhat

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attracted to Darlene's girlfriend, who's wearing these incredibly shiny red pants.

In general, I find dialogue to be an enormous challenge; narrative comes much more easily to me. When it comes to dialogue, I very much feel that I'm crafting the fiction, working it out intellectually. I sometimes hear writers say that they just let their characters talk. I'd love to do that, but for me the dialogue portion of a story is pretty workmanlike. There's very little magic about it. This bit of dialogue was easier for me than usual, however. As I was writing it, I was visualizing my house, my driveway, my parents, my sisters. I was thinking about what my parents would have said if one of us had decided to move to Texas with a girl who drove an El Camino.

*Every short story writer hears the same adage: a story needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. When you sit down to write a story, do you think about this? What is your strategy for writing a short story?*

I usually have no idea where a story is going until it gets there, and then, over several revisions, it may go in an entirely different direction by the time I'm finished.

For me, a story often begins with an idea of a relationship between two people. The germ of the relationship may come from a moment between another person and me. This is the way "Down the Shore" came about. My husband Kevin and I were having a dinner party, and he was telling the story of how he met Bruce Springsteen, a story I'd heard many times before and had always believed without question. But this time, as he was telling it, a small detail changed. And it occurred to me that perhaps he'd been lying all along, perhaps he had created this fiction, one in a number of great stories he had, just to impress me. And I suddenly saw him as somehow more mysterious, more layered than I had imagined. The entire story came from this idea of a woman who suspects that her significant other's stories are untrue, that he is incapable of being honest. (As it turned out, by the way, he really did spend an hour on the phone one night with The Boss).

Other stories come from an image. "The Girl in the Fall-Away Dress" grew out of a moment when I looked up from my car on Market Street in San Francisco and saw a woman in a loose-fitting dress doing some sort of dance on a footbridge that stretched over the street, and a gust of wind lifted the dress just as I was approaching. I heard the line in my head, decided that would be the title, then wrote a story to match the title.

I rarely do much editing or changing of the beginning of a story, because this is the part that comes most naturally to me. The middle and end tend to come out pretty clunky at first and need lots of work.

*Both the collection and the novel depict sexual experiences, heterosexual and homosexual. What is the power of the sexual or sensual?*

I think that sex in literature, as in life, should go beyond the merely titillating. Sometimes we have sex for recreational purposes; sometimes we have sex because it is the most natural expression of our emotional attachments; sometimes we have sex in moments of despair, because an intimate physical connection with another person may be the best way to draw ourselves, momentarily, out of that despair. Sometimes we have sex because, as a group of precocious schoolchildren put it in a wonderful story by Donald Barthelme, “We require an assertion of value, we are frightened.” In my opinion, sex has as natural a place in literature as does work, religion, and death.

One of the stories in *The Girl in the Fall-Away Dress*, “Propaganda,” involves a lonely wife who fondly recalls the S&M games she used to play with her now-absentee husband. When I read that story in public, people tend to laugh, but I don’t think it’s necessarily a “ha-ha” kind of laughter. People have told me the story makes them uncomfortable. Ultimately, it’s a sad story about a woman wasting away in a destitute marriage—sex is a way of highlighting her severe loneliness. I think sex is a great way to show the awkward, uncomfortable, painful moments in our characters’ lives.

*Do you feel as though writing the homosexual experience is risky, being a heterosexual woman?*

I am, it is true, happily married to a fabulous guy named Kevin. But we come to marriage, as to writing, with many experiences. The sex scenes between the narrator and her friend Amanda Ruth in *Dream of the Blue Room* are about sex, certainly, but they’re also about the intimacy between young female friends, an intimacy many women have experienced to some degree or another. It often happens that, after a reading, a woman will come up to me in private and ask, “Was it difficult to write the scene with Amanda Ruth by the pond?” My answer tends to be no.

*Both books transverse coasts. The collection moves between California, Alabama, New York, and even Texas; the novel takes the reader from New York, to Alabama, to China. Could you discuss the importance of place in your work?*

I’ve moved around a lot, and I’ve done a lot of traveling. Places stick in my mind—the natural and manmade architecture of a place, the character of its people, the climate. These things find their way into my writing without any real intent on my part. The emotional heart of *Dream of the Blue Room* is a small river-town in Alabama, even though the present action is set on the

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Yangtze River. My extended family is all in Mississippi, so I spent a lot of time there growing up, mainly in Brookhaven. My identity was formed on Alabama's Gulf Coast, the bulk of my memory is grounded there, and my fiction always pulls me that way, even when I set out to write about somewhere else.

As time passes, other places where I've made my bed have also taken root in my mind and have become fertile ground for fiction. My new novel is very much a San Francisco book, and yet, again, large sections of the book cast back in time to Alabama. I find that I'm incapable of separating my fiction from place.

*In Dream of the Blue Room, how did you approach writing dialogue?*

I spent a couple of months in China in 1998, which is how *Dream of the Blue Room* began. I also spent a year as an English tutor for the president of a Chinese trading company. I wanted to get the syntax down on the page as accurately as I could, but at the same time I was worried that, by doing so, it might look as though the narrator was poking fun at the villagers. So I toned down the syntactical missteps quite a bit, and tried to get the flavor of the speech without being disrespectful or making the text tedious to read.

One thing I noticed while in China was a tendency toward double-speak. This happens, to a large degree, out of political necessity, but also out of a cultural appreciation of nuance and subtlety. As a foreigner in China, I always had to be aware of the subtext, of the meaning beneath the surface of the words. This happens in any language, of course, and in any language it can make for interesting tension on the page, just as it makes for tension in real life.

An example: In Beijing, I visited Bei Da University, the country's premier university, with a former student. This was nine years after Tiananmen Square, and I was still very interested in what had happened, but I knew it was not a subject that was open for discussion. We passed a bulletin board, which was covered with handmade flyers. I asked my friend what the flyers were for, and he explained that they were ads for English-language tutoring services. He paused and added, "In 1989, there were many other kinds of messages here, but now the students just want to study and learn English. We want to make better business in China." The subtext, of course, was that political flyers had once been common there, and that they were no longer allowed, and, perhaps, the students were no longer very interested in such matters.

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*Dream of the Blue Room is political at times; one scene that sticks out long after reading is the “tour” of the young couple’s modern apartment. What were your experiences with the Chinese government?*

My experiences very much helped to shape what I put on the page. During my time in China, Clinton made a speech at Tiananmen Square. The event was highly controlled by the government in terms of who could attend and what could be broadcast. The soldiers kept pushing us back, keeping us from getting too close to the action.

On a number of occasions, while talking to someone who wanted to practice his or her English with me, we would be approached by a third party—sometimes in uniform, sometimes not—who would begin questioning us belligerently. I don’t speak Mandarin, so I was never sure what was being said. But I could surmise—by virtue of the fact that the person with whom I was talking would walk away or change seats on the train or suddenly become very tense—that someone did not want them talking to me. This was 1998, and Chinese citizens were very much discouraged from talking to foreigners. I hear this is changing somewhat.

*You mentioned before that details sometimes trigger a story or scene. How important are the little details?*

In *Dream of the Blue Room*, the name of the cruise director, Elvis Paris, comes from a guy who worked at my apartment building in Beijing. I still have his business card with his name printed on it. He took Elvis as his first name because he was a big fan, and Paris as his last name because his dream in life was to visit Paris. The little details are crucial, both in novels and short stories. We get to character and place through those details.

*Did you ever experience a bout of writer’s block while writing Dream of the Blue Room? How did you deal with it? And how much of what you wrote actually became the novel that was published?*

I didn’t experience writer’s block with *Dream of the Blue Room* simply because of the way it was written. Because of my teaching load at the time, I only had a month each summer to write. I went away three years in a row to a colony, where I spent a month doing nothing but writing this novel, up to eight hours a day. By the time that summer month came around each year, I was so anxious to get back to work that writer’s block wasn’t a problem.

I’m also lucky in that my husband is a writer who has a wealth of ideas. He’s a constant kick in the pants, telling me what scenes need to be written and working out kinks in plot, as well as alerting me when my male characters are rotten to the point of not being believable.

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About a month before I sent the novel out for the final time, I axed a pretty major character and got rid of the first three chapters. There were probably about a hundred pages that didn't make it into the final draft.

*Fledgling writers are told time and time again to sit down and write every day. Besides the colonies, do you write at any other time?*

Until this year, I did almost all of my writing during those one-month writing residencies. That's because I was teaching simultaneously at three colleges, in addition to teaching private writing workshops. Fortunately, my teaching load has eased enormously over the past year. Now I teach in two Bay Area MFA programs, which allows me to devote two eight-hour days each week to writing. I also try to get a couple of hours in on Saturday and Sunday mornings.

When I begin a new novel, I buy a moleskin notebook in which I jot down ideas, list scenes that need to be written, make notes on arrangement, etc. My research goes in the moleskin notebook, too.

*Are you working in a new notebook now?*

I've recently finished a draft of a novel set in San Francisco. Kind of my love letter to San Francisco, I guess. The narrator is a photographer, and there's a lot of stuff going on with memory—loss of memory, false memory. A relationship falls apart, of course. I don't think I've ever written anything in which a relationship does not fall apart.

*You said you teach in two MFA programs. Do you find it difficult to write and teach?*

It's difficult to write and teach composition. It's difficult to write and teach too much. But teaching and writing is far easier, I'm sure, than trying to write with a nine-to-five job. Or trying to write with three kids. Those of us who make a living teaching at universities are extraordinarily lucky. Unless you're teaching summer school, you have almost three months every summer to write, which is far more luxury than most of the population gets.

*When did you begin writing?*

I knew when I was fourteen years old that I wanted to be a writer, but at that time I hoped to be a journalist. As an undergraduate I went to the University of Alabama, where I had the good fortune to study with some wonderful professors like Allen Wier and Don Hendrie, Jr.

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*When did you begin sending out your work?*

I started sending stories out when I was 22. I got loads of rejections, of course, but about a year after I graduated I had my first story accepted for publication in a book called *Alabama Bound*, which was an anthology of work by Alabama Writers.

*Were there times, when you were just beginning your writing career, you ever felt discouraged, like you weren't going to make a living as a writer? What was it that changed your mind?*

Oh, all the time. Most of the time. Even now, I don't have much hope of making a living as a writer—if that means being able to procure food, shelter, single-malt Scotch, and sassy red shoes with the proceeds of my books. I'm lucky in that I love teaching, and publishing books allows me to teach creative writing; in that sense, I am able to make a living as a teacher because I'm a writer.

Writing is, in many ways, an inherently discouraging profession. There are, of course, the rejections, which most of us have received in the hundreds. There are the agents who don't want to represent a story collection because it won't sell, there are the conglomerate bookstores who exercise devastating control over the publishers, there are the trifling advances and the readings with only five people in attendance, four of whom are related to the author who's reading.

But there is, thank God, the joy of writing, which is the only thing that keeps many of us in the cluttered room, alone, day after day, writing stories and novels which may never see print. In addition to the joy of writing, there are little successes along the way. During the time agents were rejecting my first failed novel (a grad-school effort of five-hundred-plus pages), literary magazines were accepting my short stories. I will forever be grateful to those editors, because every time a story was accepted, I felt I really had a chance as a writer. And there were always professors—at the University of Alabama, and later at the Universities of Arkansas and Miami—who were kind enough to encourage me despite the fact that what I was writing at the time was terribly flawed. They were willing to see something in it, willing to believe that over time, I would write something good.

My stroke of fortune was the call from AWP in the summer of 2000, when I learned that my story collection would be published. That afternoon, to celebrate, I walked down Market Street and bought a pair of shiny red Mary Janes from my favorite thrift store, Crossroads Trading Company. They cost nineteen dollars. Then I bought a bottle of champagne, which Kevin and I drank out of plastic cups at the very cold China Beach.