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Abstract

Lorrie Moore is the author of three novels and five collections of stories. Moore has been recognized for her work with the Irish Times International Fiction Prize and a Lannan Foundation fellowship, as well as the PEN/Malamud Award and the Rea Award for her achievement in the short story. Her most recent novel, A Gate at the Stairs, was shortlisted for the 2010 Orange Prize and the PEN/Faulkner. Her most recent collection, Bark, was shortlisted for the Story Prize, the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, and the Premio Gregor von Rezzori prize. She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2001 and to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2005. Booth's Eliza Tudor interviewed Moore when she visited campus in the fall of 2010, just after the release of A Gate at the Stairs.

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October 14, 2016

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by Eliza Tudor

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Eliza Tudor: You are a wonderful namer. Tassie Keltjin. Sarah Brink. Abby Mallon. Do the names come first, or do you find yourself often doing the find/replace function on your computer—naming (or renaming) the character in process? Naming is very important in this book—could you talk about that?

Lorrie Moore: One tries to find one that is both suitable and interesting, one that both expresses something (in its sound, usually) and is utilitarian, both. Something you as the writer and that person as the character can live with. It's not unlike naming anything—children or pets.

ET: It irks me when people bring up the years between your books. What do they expect? This is a big novel. You have a big life. I loved your quote about having to “construct a life in which writing can occur.” Writers do this—we figure out how to make a living, how to live around our work/with our work, how to fulfill our responsibilities while carving out the time and space in which to write. You've spoken about this balancing act of teaching-single parenthood-writing. This is meaningful to women like me (and there are a lot of women like

me). I'm not sure how to ask this—has life dictated the work you've done along with what the story calls for? A novel for a certain time of life, a short story for another?

LM: Oh, I haven't come up with any rules. It's all an improvisation. There are people who feel that short stories are better for a busy life and others who feel that novels are better for that. I sometimes have felt both of these things are true and other times, in fact most times, that neither of them is.

ET: One of the first lessons for beginning writers is the lesson of specificity. But *your specifics* are different from other writers' specifics; your specifics create a heightened world (green isn't just green—it's "part pine, part portabella, part parsley..."). Don't get me started on "pebble, pecan, portabella, peanut, platinum." How do you make this possible? I know the arts aren't simply important in your work, but in your life (piano, ballet, painting, a family of writers and amateur actors). Is this an obsession (in all the good ways)—specifics—the arts? Do you build this somewhere outside your mind? I'm imagining a corkboard behind your computer screen with pinned menus and paint chips.

LM: Tassie Keltjin is a certain kind of character, and I gave her extra language to express her revulsion or her fascination. I just let her riff—because she also was a musician. The level of specificity depends on your narrator and your project.

ET: Food is important in this novel. Sarah as a chef. Baby food as dessert. Baby greens/gourmet potatoes. Caramelized sage. The scene of Tassie actually eating this food in Le Petit Moulin—Sarah's type of food. The BLTs with her father. Are you a good cook? A good restaurant goer? Did you find yourself eating a certain type of food or drink while working on specific scenes? "Crab mousseline with a shellfish cappuccino?"

LM: Shellfish cappuccino I once saw on a menu, and I believe it was served at my table, and I may have eaten it myself. I have no memory of it except as an astonishing term. I wanted to capture in this book the regional orientation toward food that belongs to the breadbasket of any country, in this case the Midwest, but also our national obsession with eating. There is a level of deliciousness in our eating that has become absurd, but interesting to me. Some part of me feels it's a lovely celebration of a peaceful and fruitful world, and another part of me feels there's something essentially morally wrong with something like crab mousseline with shellfish cappuccino.

ET: Like Tassie, I'm just the kind of Midwestern woman who always says, "Sounds good." Who grew up on fish fries and Jell-O salad. I know that world—and then there is this year, this changed world in Tassie's life—and she is writing about that year from a distance of maybe eight or nine years. Did you have to know the woman she became to complete this novel? Those last lines seem predestined—*Jane Eyre* revisited. Did you have to work toward those lines? Or work back from them? Could you talk about that narration of looking back? Is Tassie writing from a point when she no longer says, "Sounds good"?

LM: She is narrating from a place where she is truly an adult. At twenty-eight one is probably as bright as one is ever going to be. That was the year I finished my first novel, written by hand and on a manual typewriter, so I think of it as the place in life where one is most determined to communicate. And one feels one's childhood as completely done and far away.