ALUMNI BOOKS

Good Writing Demands “Ruthlessness and an Open Heart”

Elizabeth McCracken’s latest short stories are dark, and funny

BY SUSAN SELIGSON

Reviewing Elizabeth McCracken’s recent memoir about having a stillborn baby, New York Times critic Lucinda Rosenfeld writes that “if a book’s merit were measured in subway stops accidentally bypassed while being read,” the book would rank high. She was so absorbed that she found herself three stations past her destination. Whether writing nonfiction about profound personal loss or fiction about poignant giants or Borscht Belt comics, McCracken (CAS ’88, GRS ’88) is deliciously readable and full of heart. She writes in a voice that makes you wish you could corner her for a cappuccino and discuss everything under the sun.

“What’s love at first sight but a bucket thrown over you that smooths out all your previous self-loathing, so that you can see yourself slick and matted down and audacious?” This, from the story “Terpsicore” in McCracken’s new collection, Thunderstruck & Other Stories (Dial Press, 2014), is the kind of sentence she bestows on the reader, again and again, in a way that both stops you short and keeps you hurtling forward. The book’s nine stories are dark, often funny, and always built on a scaffold of raw human truths. Whether they deal with the ghost of a dead child (“Something Amazing”) or the searing folly of parents’ best intentions (“Thunderstruck”), they have a way of taking your breath away.

In “Peter Elroy: A Documentary by Ian Casey,” Elroy, a once larger-than-life man dying of pancreatic cancer, has been deposited with his son’s family by his wife. As the story draws to a close, a young boy asks, “Are wolves real?” In McCracken’s deft, but never heavy, hand, the prose winds around to the reply that yes, wolves are real. “And they’re coming,” Elroy tells the boy. “Not for you. You wouldn’t eat you. You’re too small. Too thin…” But, the dying man continues, “I’m lovely… I’m delicious.” “We’ll protect you,” says the boy. “Darling,” says Elroy, “it’s all right. Let them come.” And with one thrifty closing sentence, McCracken delivers one of her master strokes: “And they did, one night soon afterwards.”

McCracken is the author of four previous books: the story collection Here’s Your Hat What’s Your Hurry, the novels The Giant’s House and Niagara Falls All Over Again, and the memoir An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination. A self-described travel addict, she’s received grants and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Liguria Study Center, the American Academy in Berlin, the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She holds the James A. Michener Chair in Fiction at the University of Texas at Austin and, as she puts it, boy are her arms tired.

McCracken talked to Bostonia about the often tortuous writing process, the redemptive power of humor, and why those Amazon ratings drive her nuts.

BOSTONIA: What motivates you to write short stories as opposed to a novel? Is the creative process different, and what are the rewards of each?

MC CRACKEN: My first book—by now I think of it as my apprentice work—was a collection of short stories. After I was done with it, I wrote novels for while. I started one or two without finishing, then wrote two I finished and published, and I thought I was done writing short stories. I thought I had stretched my brain out of shape. Then I wrote a novel that fell apart. About a week after I realized it wasn’t going to work (I was probably on the third draft), a magazine asked me if I had a short story. So I took a piece of the novel—a long flashback that had nothing to do with the front story—and turned it into a short story, and I remembered the pleasure of writing them. Over seven years, I wrote more, and found I was most of the way to a book.

Do you often read about or encounter a character and think, there’s a seed for a story or novel? Do you have some trove of ideas or beginnings that were never developed?

I have a bunch of things I’m always trying to write that don’t work out. One of them is the story of my great-uncle Louis, who once (so the family story goes) snapped off the finger of a statue at the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis. I actually wrote an entire story for this collection—previously, the finger was always a minor plot point—and it was a pretty bad story. I’ve put it aside. For the most part, an idea either
works the minute I try to slip it in fiction, or not at all.

**Does being really funny ever get in your way so that you occasionally have to rein yourself in? Is it a challenge to balance humor and pathos?**

I wish I were so funny I had to rein myself in. Most of the joking in my work is pretty reflexive, though sometimes I do write a line that makes me laugh. They are undoubtedly not the lines that make anyone else laugh. As far as balancing humor and pathos, I think humor and pathos are always twined together. That’s how I’ve found it in real life. I don’t trust any piece of art that suggests that sadness is unalloyed. At the worst times in my life I’ve always been grateful to someone who can make a black joke and crack me up.

**As a creative writing teacher, do you believe that every student is destined to have a voice, or do you sense that some never will find theirs? What are young writers’ most common missteps?**

A voice is important—if you’re lucky, you have one—but a worldview is much more important, a way of looking at the world and human beings with interest and ruthlessness and an open heart. Indeed, I would say one of the most common mistakes young writers make is that lack of open heart—they satirize their characters (I *definitely* did this), they poke fun, they feel they should know more than the characters or the readers. Some young writers make their need to be the smartest person involved in the project of their fiction palpable.

**Who were some of your mentors early on?**

I had great mentors at BU— I really had incredible luck with my teachers there, and I managed to talk my way into graduate workshops with both George Starbuck and Derek Walcott (Hon.’93). But the most important writing class I took was an undergraduate workshop with Sue Miller (GRS’80), who was so brilliant and generous and rigorous. She was an incredible teacher, and exactly the teacher I needed.

In graduate school, Allan Gurganus was my first teacher, another incredible stroke of luck. It’s an incredible coincidence, or no coincidence at all, that both Sue and Allan read their classes Grace Paley stories the last day of class. I still do this myself. I did it today at the last meeting of my undergraduate workshop.

**In reading to your children, what favorite books are you revisiting? Which of those made you fall in love with words, and stories?**

I was shocked by how beautiful Peter Pan is, amazed at how lovely William Steig’s sentences are. I love Mary Poppins—the real Mary Poppins, of the books—all over again. When I was a kid we had a single book by an English writer and illustrator named Kathleen Hale, about an orange cat named Orlando. Now my kids now have a whole bunch of Orlando the Marmalade books. I think Hale is one of the great unsung geniuses of the 20th century. And when I was a child, *Higglety Pigglety Pop* by Maurice Sendak (Hon.’77) was one of my favorite books, and it still is, but for different reasons.

Many of your sentences are so breathtaking that I feel the need to read them aloud if I’m not alone. How much rewriting do you do, and do you ever spend a long time fiddling with one paragraph, one phrase? Language is incredibly important to me, though I would say it’s hard to break down exactly what tinkering is composition and what is revising. I don’t spend hours getting a sentence right—I’m much more concerned with getting paragraphs right, or pages—but when I revise I’m likely to take words out and put them back in 10 million ways. My major revisions are always on the level of plot, though. That’s where I make my biggest mistakes.

**You wrote your memoir in three weeks and didn’t do much revising. Was this a one-time effort, propelled by profound experiences and colliding emotions? Are you more drawn to memoir now?**

I wrote that book starting when my son Gus was three weeks old. I wrote it when he napped, in little snatches, and I was sort of surprised when it ended up as a book. Writing it saved me. I wrote things down so I wouldn’t worry over them in my brain. I’m sure I’ll write essays, but I hope that life doesn’t give me enough material for another memoir.

**Do you read reviews, and if so, do criticisms have any value for you or just make you regret reading them?**

I do read reviews in newspapers and magazines. Everyone loves praise and everyone hates criticism, and I am no different. I love the praise and I don’t love the complaints. I try not to read Amazon or Goodreads reviews, not because I don’t care, but because I’m more likely to be driven nuts by the pure volume of them. One person’s opinion at a time I can handle. The aggregate, the grading, the average number of stars—that all gets under my skin in a way I wish it wouldn’t. I’m childish about it. Dude, why did you give me one star? You ruined my whole average! So I’m happier not looking.

**What novelists do you cherish most? Who are you reading lately?**

Well, I love Grace Paley—she never wrote a novel, but her work has meant more to me for a longer time than anyone I can think of. I was just talking to a graduate student about how much Gish Jen’s work means to me. Both of those writers are brilliant when it comes to combining the funny and the awful. The book I’ve just picked up because I missed it when it came out is Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying*. I love her work.

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