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Takolander, Maria and Heyward, Will 2011, Maria Takolander interviewed by Will Heyward, *Verity la*, pp. 1-4.

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Maria Takolander interviewed by Will Heyward

16 Jul



Will Heyward: I recently read your story *A Roānkin Philosophy of Poetry* (winner of the *ABR Short Story Prize*), which takes the form of a monologue. The story is ironic, funny, and absurd, but it's also quite mysterious and beautiful. The action of the story is pure invention, fantasy. The story is very cerebral, concerned with language. Does the fact you wrote a monologue have something to do with that? Do you think there is a different potential for a story that is a monologue, to say, a story told through dialogue, or by a third-person narrator? For something like *A Roānkin Philosophy of Poetry*, how does the form you choose for your story influence what you are saying (or vice versa)?

Maria Takolander: I was thrilled to win that prize, especially for a story that was such great fun to write!

I guess I chose first-person narration to reflect the self-absorption of the poet narrating the story. The poet/narrator is particularly obtuse when engaged in dialogue; he's outrageously inept at understanding what others say and do. That, of course, provides the irony and comedy of the piece. So, to answer your question, conveying a sense of a monologue was important in contributing to character development and the ironic nature of the story. However, the story—as you generously suggest—isn't meant to be just funny. The character isn't meant to be just a comic figure. I have a tragic amount of faith in that poet's quest!

Will Heyward: I suppose a certain amount of 'tragic' faith is necessary for all writers. I'm curious about this because as well as being a writer of prose and poetry, you are a teacher of literature and creative writing, and the author of a book of criticism. I'm wondering how these different occupations interact, if at all. Elif Batuman, an American writer and teacher, wrote an article not long ago, entitled, "[Get a real degree](#)," criticising creative writing programs, in which she says, 'When 'great literature' is replaced by 'excellent fiction', that's the real betrayal of higher education'. Is there a tension for you between being a writer of fiction and someone involved in the formal study of literature and creative writing? And, if so, how does it resolve itself?

Maria Takolander: I often get asked about the ways in which critical and creative writing work together, and my answer is always that they work together very nicely. Both involve thinking intensely about a subject until the brain begins to produce insights—what it thinks are at any rate! In both forms of writing, one meets the challenge of the blank page, searching for something meaningful to say, encountering frustrations and revelations. Thinking critically is necessary to the integrity of creative writing; thinking creatively is necessary to the originality of critical writing.

In terms of teaching creative writing, I'm not familiar with Batuman's paper, but I'm familiar with her argument, which has been quite well-rehearsed. In response to Batuman, I guess I would say that, for me, creative writing programs aren't necessarily about 'elite' goals such as producing 'great' literature. They are about enabling students to understand that, through language, they have the power to creatively rethink things, including how they see themselves and their world. I would use the example of an exercise I do in my poetry class of asking students to imitate Charles Simic's dinggedichte or 'thing poems'. I find that students experience a real thrill in revising their relationship to the familiar and conventional, a thrill that I would argue comes from a renewed sense of agency. The world isn't a given; the subject isn't powerless to negotiate meaning and value. Having said that—and taking me back to my earlier point about the compatibility between creative and critical writing—a truly creative rethinking can only occur if one is enabled to think critically about the status quo first.

Perhaps underlying Batuman's argument is the idea that creative writers are born and not made, but it's not one to which I subscribe. Given that we're not born with language—although I won't dispute the idea that we're born with a brain geared to learn language—I'm not convinced that we can be born as creative geniuses. What I believe is that intense reading—and thinking—can provoke a new relationship with language and the world that enables creativity in its most interesting and valued forms. For this reason, I'm always telling my writing students to take on literature subjects, and I find that the best students—in writing and in literature—do both. After all, reading and writing, as many writers have suggested, are not altogether separable. When I'm writing I'm making visible my thoughts in a way that enables me to read them and think about them more, thus producing more writing—and, in turn, reading. In addition, becoming a good reader of other writing means that you'll have a chance of becoming a good reader of your own writing—enabled to recognise, hopefully, what works and what doesn't.

As you can see by my longwinded response, this is a question that comes up a lot, and it's one that I'm very happy to answer!

William Heyward: Your answer reminds me of something Guy Davenport (a great writer who, by all accounts, was also a great teacher) once said about teaching English and writing fiction: 'You get up in the morning and you've got Keats' 'Odes' to take some sophomores through, and you've got a chapter of *Ulysses* for your graduate students, and the mind gets in the habit of finding cross-references among subjects.' And, at this point, I can't help quoting Borges who said, I think, that some people were proud of

the books they had written, but that he was proud of the books he had read. There are many other great writers, such as Penelope Fitzgerald, who have spent at least as much time teaching as writing. So, in this context of drawing inspiration from the things you have read and taught, and if reading is inseparable from writing, I want to ask, what books you are especially proud of having read? Who are the authors you love to teach, and why?



Maria Takolander: Borges is, as usual, absolutely right. I'm passionately attached to certain books that others have written, whereas I want to put behind me the things I have done! A writer is always indebted to other writers. I love the poetry and prose of Borges for its thrilling embodiment of ideas in aesthetic landscapes; for its cool irony and lavish sensationalism. His writing reminds me that it's exciting to be alive in a world that we don't understand but that offers experiences of such intellectual and emotional intensity. Coetzee's work is extraordinary; he exposes his readers, but at the same time he reveals his own vulnerability. His writing evokes the suffering that unavoidably comes with living and, indeed, the limitations of Borges' kind of literary narcissism. The world and our literary interventions in it aren't just a game. I wrote an honours thesis on Coetzee and part of a PhD thesis on Borges, motivated by a desire to become more intimate with their work.

While I have taught the literature of Coetzee and Borges, my favourite subject to teach is poetry, and I love introducing students, in particular, to the defamiliarising poetry of Simic and of the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar. Cortázar has a sequence of 'instruction' poems ('Instructions for climbing a staircase' and 'Instructions for winding a watch') that are just wonderful in re-engaging students with the world, which is what poetry, in its extraordinary attentiveness to things, can achieve.

William Heyward: If, as teacher, you privilege poetry, where do you stand as writer? I've asked you a little about your short story writing, but perhaps you see yourself as more of a poet? And, getting back to your earlier comments about the symbiotic relationship between critical and creative writing and thinking, how much attention do you pay to categories like: novel and short story; fiction and non-fiction; and even prose and poetry?

Maria Takolander: That's a surprisingly difficult question. I guess I must pay some attention to different categories in writing, because at times I write a poem; at other times a short story. Having said that, I've recently been writing a lot of prose poetry. Can I say that the decision about whether to write a poem or a short story is related to something as banal as space and time? This has three components for me. There's the space and time necessary to exploring a particular subject; there's the fact that dealing with distances in space and time is more suitable to fiction; and then there's the ways in which my own personal space and time impact on whether I can write a poem or a short story! Having said that, if you're committed to poetry, you can always write prolonged verse—even a verse novel. I guess I'm not particularly committed to lineation. In any case, prose and poetry are, for me, both inspired by the same desire to think more deeply about a particular subject of interest or mystery; to see where thought and writing might lead me.

William Heyward: It's convenient that you raise the matter of time, because I want to ask about both your past and your future as a writer, not as an occupation but as an identity chosen for yourself. How did you come to writing? What might you write in the future and where might readers look for it? George Steiner published a book not too long ago called, *My Unwritten Books*, describing the seven books he has not and will not write, because he is not capable or because the subject is too painful or too threatening, etc. Perhaps this is not the right question for a writer early in their career, but, do you have any unwritten books?



Maria Takolander: I've always been a reader and a writer, but I only started to publish when I was in my 30s. I already have lots of unwritten books, but that's mostly to do with time. Borges once wished that an author might be judged simply on the strength of his ideas; I like that fantasy! I do have plans, however, to bring certain writing projects to fruition in the near future: another book of poems and a collection of short stories. I'm also working, intermittently, on a crypto-autobiographical cultural history of Finland, which is called *Swampland*. (To explain, I'm a first generation Finnish-Australian.) In terms of writing that is painful and threatening, it's not something that I tend to avoid. In fact, an intense and troubling experience in writing provides me with the sense that the writing has some integrity; that I've unsettled something I hadn't thought enough about before; that I've achieved a new way of thinking about a subject. And if the writing evokes a strong response in me, I figure that it might also affect a reader. I think I'm probably evading your question about painful and threatening subjects, but that's only appropriate!