Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Conversation with Melissa Ostrom

Bunkong Tuon · Tuesday, February 15th, 2022

Melissa Ostrom is the author of *The Beloved Wild* (Feiwel & Friends, 2018), a Junior Library Guild book and an Amelia Bloomer Award selection, and *Unleaving* (Feiwel & Friends, 2019). Her stories have appeared in many journals and been selected for *Best Small Fictions 2019*, *Best Microfiction 2020*, *Best Small Fictions 2021*, and *Best Microfiction 2021*. She lives with her husband and children in Holley, New York.

It is my pleasure to interview Melissa Ostrom about a wide range of subjects, including writing, literary influences, feminism, the creative process, music, humor, and parenting. You can learn more about Melissa at www.melissaostrom.com and follow her on Twitter @melostrom. In addition to learning more about Melissa as a writer, you will also see that she is one of the most generous and kind-hearted people on social media.

Melissa Ostrom

What was your childhood like? When did you know you wanted to write?

I was born in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, but spent most of my childhood in the Appalachian region of Chautauqua County, New York's westernmost county, on the edge of Pennsylvania. My parents were teenagers when they married; four kids later, they divorced. For most of my childhood, we moved around and didn't have much. This sounds grim, but it wasn't always. My parents, though young, were talented and ambitious. Juggling jobs and kids, they eventually earned college

degrees. Wherever we were living at any given time—trailer, apartment, house—our home frequently rang with music, conversation, and laughter. Stories, too. My parents are natural storytellers.

Though I developed an interest in crafting stories of my own in high school, it wasn't something I planned to pursue seriously or even imagined I could. It definitely wasn't encouraged. My parents didn't want my siblings or me to scrabble around, as they had, and would have answered my "When I grow up, I want to be a writer" with "Are you nuts? That's a hobby. You can't make a living doing that." I was told repeatedly, "Go to college, and get some kind of license," the refrain of the practical haunted by poverty. That's what three of us did. My older sister, younger brother, and I all became certified teachers. I didn't write with publishing in mind until my mid-thirties.

Who are some of the cultural makers (i.e. writers, poets, musicians, filmmakers, etc.) that influence you as an artist? Why are their works important to you? What do they teach you about writing specifically and storytelling in general?

My family was musical. We sang and played instruments. In addition to participating in orchestra, band, chorus, a cappella, and madrigals at school, my siblings and I took part in community organizations, like the Junior Guilders, a singing and dancing group for kids, and the Jamestown Orchestra of Youth.

Then there was our church, and there was our local Little Theater, too: Music kept my family involved in both. These were very different worlds, one solemn and respectful, the other cheeky, seedy, brassy, and irreverent. Yet, at least for me, both entailed acting and, in sometimes complicated ways, reinforced my appreciation for storytelling. I grew up memorizing showtunes, lines for bit parts, and scripture. By my tween years, I was an avid reader, but even if I hadn't become a bookworm, the theater and the church would have engendered within me a love for language. Both realms demand attention to laden narratives and emphasize the dulcet and mystical potential of artfully combined words.

So I sang in the church choir and performed in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals and did all the other things a lot of kids in the eighties and nineties did—roller-skated to Diana Ross's "Upside Down" and Olivia Newton-John's "Magic," sunbathed on the sticky black-tar roof of our sagging porch while listening to Prince and Indigo Girls, slumber partied in basement dens and messy bedrooms noisy with Michael Jackson and David Bowie songs, and, at school dances, hoped I'd get a chance to slow dance to Phil Collins's "A Groovy Kind of Love."

Could you share with our Cultural Daily readers the origin story of your first novel, The Beloved Wild? How did the idea of the novel come to you? What central question did you want to explore in this novel?

In part, *The Beloved Wild* is my love letter to my community. I moved to Orleans County in western New York's Genesee Valley twenty-four years ago to teach English at Kendall High School. This area's history has interested me for a long time. The beginnings of the women's rights movement unfolded in these parts, with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention and the subsequent Rochester Convention. It's wonderful, living so close to the cradle of American feminism.

This area also saw our country's first wave of westward expansion. In the early 1800s, many young men left the comforts of their New England homes and, after purchasing their parcels from the Holland Land Company, settled here. The region, sometimes called Lake Ontario fruit country,

still fosters prosperous farms. Between the sweeping lake, orchards, cobblestone houses, and Erie Canal, it's a lovely place. Indeed, Genesee comes from the Seneca word for "beautiful valley."

My idea for this novel took shape one day when I was trudging around an old cemetery, searching for a patch of trilliums I remembered spying the previous spring. I came upon a family plot that gave me pause. If I was interpreting the names and dates on the antique headstones correctly, they suggested that one man must have had three consecutive wives. The nearby infant burials provided some explanation.

I wondered what it must have been like to grow up in the early nineteenth century when pregnancy and childbirth posed such great risks to girls, risks that were nearly impossible to avoid, since society prescribed marriage and motherhood as girls' only suitable future.

From this woolgathering, my character Harriet Submit Winter was conceived. I wanted to know how a plucky girl would feel about the life that awaited her, how she might confront and escape it. I wanted to give her agency.

Tell us more about the protagonist Harriet Submit Winter.

Harriet Submit Winter is a curious teenager. She questions things. She especially wonders why, after enjoying a childhood of racing, climbing, sledding, and swimming with her best friend and brother Gid, she doesn't get to look forward to the unfettered future this brother is promised.

Adulthood widens Gid's opportunities: He can travel west if he wants, buy land cheap, farm it as he chooses, build a home, and grow a fortune. In contrast, the older Harriet gets, the less free she becomes, until, at last, life has narrowed her options to one: wife/helpmate/mother. Harriet realizes, within this single socially condoned role, she'd be legally governed by her husband, who, for instance, could decide how many children she should be made to bear. This vexes her for many reasons, including a very personal one: Childbirth is how her biological mother died. For a middle name, Harriet has inherited her mother's first—Submit. She hates the implications of that name and the sorrows submissiveness effects.

It's interesting to me when readers see Harriet's railing against women's powerlessness as unusual behavior for her time period—the early 1800s. I don't think it was. And I don't think it is, regardless of how restrictive a society is. "That's not fair," even very young kids will say when they witness an injustice. We're born with a sense of our right to equal treatment. It's only that so many people in this world are taught to stop expecting fairness and to quit asking for it.

One of my favorite passages in the novel is when Harriet tells her neighbor Daniel Long about the limitations placed on women in the U.S. in the early 19th century and how she wishes she were born male. How much has the situation/plight of women changed, if any? And what hasn't changed much or at all for women?

Inequality is clearly still a problem and apparent in many ways, including the persistent gender gap in pay and the dearth of women at the top of so many fields (or in some industries, like tech, even at the bottom or in the middle).

When women do manage to attain positions of power, they often have to contend with a barrage of personal attacks, particularly in politics. Consider the vitriol, from sexist tweets to outright death threats, women like Kamala Harris, Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

frequently face. I think about how Trump supporters depicted Trump as Perseus holding up the decapitated head of a Medusa-ish Hillary Clinton, or, more recently, how Republican Rep. Paul Gosar posted a photoshopped anime video on social media showing him killing AOC. Such images of gendered violence send a menacing message: Power belongs to men. Women shouldn't be allowed to lead. If they try, they'll pay.

So while the plight of women has definitely improved since the 1800s, our society has a long way to go before full equality between women and men has been achieved.

Over the course of The Beloved Wild, Harriet Winter traverses various geographical, gender, cultural, and ideological spaces. Ultimately, she makes her own destiny. What advice would you give to parents of girls in our current climate, specifically how to raise them to be strong and independent like Harriet Submit Winter?

I'm no expert, but I suppose raising girls like Harriet would start with the parents role-modeling that strength and independence you mention, plus compassion, confidence, curiosity, and creativity, and positively interacting with their daughters, asking questions about what they think and how they feel, encouraging them to be kind to themselves and forgiving of their mistakes, and praising their intelligence and efforts, rather than their looks.

But we probably should put just as much thought into how we're raising our sons. What do boys see role-modeled in their households? Who's doing the cooking and cleaning? Who's open with their feelings? Who's interested in and compassionate toward others? Who calls the shots? Who's the big talker? Who's the good listener?

Also, while getting girls into self-defense classes sounds great, I can't help but think some boys would benefit from self-control classes. Girls wouldn't have to learn how to avoid being assaulted, if boys didn't assault them. And though we can and should help our girls believe in their potential ("I can do anything!") and show self-compassion ("I messed up, but at least I tried, and everybody makes mistakes"), as they grow older, will society permit them to do the same? I think about how critically women are scrutinized, how quickly and lastingly they're blasted for their mistakes, and how hard it is for them to succeed.

A lot still needs to change.

Humor is an important element in this novel. I found the novel quite entertaining because of humor as it offsets the brutal and traumatic scenes in the novel. Could you talk about the role of humor in this novel? Is it simply a function in YA genre or is there something more intrinsic?

Oh, Bunkong, I'm so glad this novel made you laugh. I don't know if humor is a definitive function of this genre. I've read some very funny YA novels and some sad as hell ones, too. If I managed to make *The Beloved Wild* both, I'm satisfied. After all, *life* is both: tragic and ridiculous, hard and fun. Isn't this especially apparent during our teenage years? It interests me, how humiliations and awkward situations generate humor. I'm not sure why this is true, but they do.

What advice do you have for both beginning and seasoned writers?

Sometimes I think about the years when I was writing regularly and not publishing at all, how easily the creating transported me and filled me with pleasure. Venturing into publishing, though exciting and a natural aspiration, complicates the writing life—blows into that Edenic solitude the

storm clouds of self-consciousness, anxiety, rejection, and hurt. Even successes, like publishing a story in an excellent journal or receiving a glowing book review, can prove distracting and weighty and suck up time and energy.

I guess, in addition to reading widely and writing regularly, the only other advice I have for new writers who are setting out to publish work (and maybe even succeeding) is to be smarter than I was about the business. Try not to let the publishing and the rejecting, the good reviews and the bad, become too important. Try to stay focused on the writing: There's our wellspring of joy.

What are you currently working on?

A middle-grade contemporary novel, the occasional blog post, a little story here and there, some revising. Working on having fun and keeping my head on straight.

(Featured image by Melissa Ostrom)

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