

# An interview with Mary Troy, author of *The Alibi Café and Other Stories*

Conducted by Karen I. Johnson

Q.

Most of your stories take place in St. Louis or in Hawai'i. I know that you are a native of St. Louis, but what is your connection to Hawai'i and how would you compare the influence of the two areas on your writing?

A.

Following a divorce and other disappointments, I moved to Honolulu in 1977, deciding it was the perfect place to start over. I landed a job at the University of Hawai'i, College of Engineering, as a technical writer and a PR writer. After I had been there more than a few years and had met a few writers in the UH English Department, I decided to try writing a short story myself. So Hawai'i influenced my writing by being the place where I began writing. The first story was set in St. Louis, though, but many subsequent stories were set in Hawai'i, a land where tradition and rootlessness seem to do battle. The first story I wrote was "Duty," and was published in the now defunct Ball State Forum. That success made me want to write more and prompted me to apply to the University of Arkansas for my MFA. I still set stories in Hawai'i, because the grace and beauty of the place is compelling.

Q.

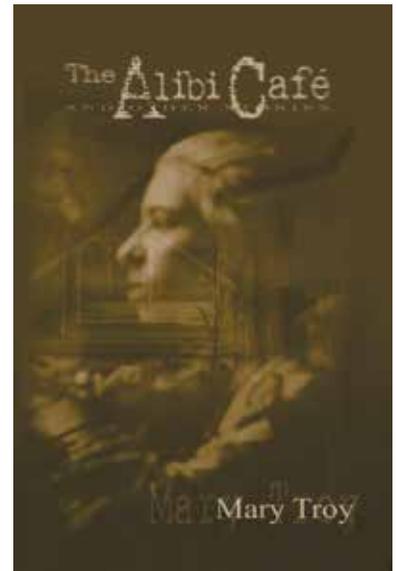
Characters in three of your stories are physically challenged, including the main character in the title story. Tell me about this element of your work.

A.

One of the joys of writing fiction is putting yourself in another's place, and I constantly try to imagine what it would be like to be someone else, often someone I know. Because I know a few people who are physically handicapped, I have tried to see the world from their views on occasion. And have tried to determine how different life would seem to me if I were handicapped. All the people I know are more stoic and accepting of their handicaps than I am when I put myself in their heads, but that does not stop me, because, of course, I am not writing about them. Also, I do think physical handicaps are just one way our lives are made difficult, just one way we become other than usual and common, and I want both of those for my characters: difficult lives and a sense of being the outsider.

Q.

You describe yourself as semi-Catholic. How would you say religion has affected your writing?



A.

Catholicism has put me in touch with people who do things for reasons other than self interest, who let a faith in something greater guide many of their actions and be what they judge themselves against. It also is, as most religions are, contradictory and confusing and open to interpretation. And because few Catholics are fundamentalists, I have always believed that has helped me understand allegory and metaphor and symbolism early on. Beyond that, I have had the usual experiences with desperate and lonely priests, with nuns who believed the classroom had been overtaken by evil spirits, and with practicing Catholics who let the line between worship and superstition blur so that ritual becomes compulsion. All these make good characters, or are at least interesting minds to try to see from.

Q.

The nine stories in this collection are at once funny and dark. As one of your characters commented, "The carnival always leaves town." I am certain I have met some of these very well developed characters. Do you know the people in these stories and how would you describe them?

A.

Not one character is based upon a single person I know, but almost all are composites of people I have had some contact with. And then, of course, since I am imagining what they would think or say or do, they are really me, themselves as they would be if I were in their shoes. A real mixture. And how I would describe them? No matter how screwed up or wrong, they are all noble. They keep going; they affect their own lives, even if not for the better. They do, they act, and in some form they survive.

Q.

When I read short stories, I understand that I will meet the characters for only a brief interlude during their lives yet I want to sense that I have known these people an entire lifetime. I felt that you accomplished this in your stories. How do you help the reader achieve this sense of intimacy with your characters?

A.

Thanks for saying I do this. It is my intent, though not easy. I suppose my knowledge of the characters is what helps the most. I do know all of them--what they eat, how they got their names, their favorite movies and books, their deepest yearnings, etc. I write whole lives for them, and though most of those details do not make it into the stories, my complete knowledge of them comes through. At least that is my hope. I try, too, to make my characters distinctly themselves, that is, though they may be representatives of a class and type, they have some characteristics not normally associated with that group and cannot be "just another under-educated single mother," or whatever the large group.

Q.

In addition to writing fiction, you teach creative writing at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. What would you say is the first rule you teach your students about writing and do you follow your own advice?

A.

One piece of advice is don't let your characters be merely victims--have them cause their own troubles and get out of their own messes however they can. Another piece of advice is, and this is harder, ask yourself why anyone would read this story, this scene, would even care about this character. Is any of it worth a reader's time? And yes, I try to follow my own advice, but that second piece is a question I cannot always answer with more than a shrug.

Still, I do ask it of myself. A third thing I tell my true beginning students early on is that emotion and substance and thus art are all in the details. For some reason, that frees them, maybe because it relieves the burden of writing about abstractions.

Q.

We have talked about how religion, the places you have lived, and your teaching profession have all worked to influence your work. Are there other major influences on your writing that we have not discussed?

A.

My parents were great talkers, and one thing they talked about was motive. Why did my father's boss stop caring about the business, for example. Why did a third cousin break off an engagement to remain at home with her mother? Why did my grandfather retreat from his own life rather than confront and fight back against what was bothering him? Why was the neighbor so opposed to his wife working outside the home? That kind of thing was as much a part of our on-going conversation as current events. They both seemed to see their talk as stories, would not tell something without giving a background, setting the scenes, explaining the connections. And we were all encouraged to speculate on motive along with them, to ponder the inner workings of others.

Another major influence on my writing is and has always been what I read. Though I did not begin writing until my mid-thirties, I have always been a reader. I took a BA in English solely because of my love of fiction. As an undergraduate, I was attracted especially to Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson and Katherine Mansfield and Melville. I still am, though have added many others to my list.

And, to give it its proper due, I should give credit to my grade school, Sacred Heart in Florissant, MO, for teaching me all those years ago that writing is fun, for making and encouraging me to create often.

My father has been dead for a few years, but he is still part of my ideal audience. I aim my work to make him smile or nod. The other part of the audience is my husband, Pierre Davis, who is a wonderfully astute reader, a good critic, and a person of great intelligence. We met in graduate school at the University of Arkansas.

Q.

Four of your stories are written in the first person. When you conceive a plot and characters, how do you determine who will tell the story?

A.

I almost always let a character talk to me for a while, tell her or his story to me first. Not that this is some hokey out of body experience, but I almost can feel as if I am taking notes, am hearing her side of things as it were. Then when the story becomes clear--because they always start with a character talking--I decide if my protagonist is able to tell it. Does she know the important stuff? Is she smart enough or honest enough or (more important) interesting enough to tell it? I prefer reading third person stories, and think sometimes first person is too easy, that if I just let her run with it, I will be missing something important I should know about what happened, and the story will be in some ways slim. But sometimes, the character has a way of telling her lies, of leading me through the events that I like too much to change. For almost all my stories, I write parts of them both ways--first and third person--before I decide.

Q.

Your book, *Joe Baker Is Dead*, was published in 1998 and nominated for several awards. How have you changed as a writer since then?

A.

I'm not sure I have changed much. I have the same concerns, and I still look for the same tragic-comic situations or interpretations of situations. I still think one of the more fascinating things about being human is the vast gulf between what we say and what we think, between how we act and how we wish we had acted. I believe that is the meat for short fiction. I have noticed, though, that I write longer stories the older I get. I know more about my characters, have more of what the film people call back story. So I end up cutting lots from my early drafts.

Q.

You mentioned early drafts. This raises a number of questions concerning the mechanics of writing. First, in creating a story, is your time devoted more to working through the story in your head or in the writing and rewriting process? In other words, do you have the story written before you ever put words on paper or do you let the story develop on paper? Second, is there an average number of drafts you work through for each of your stories? Third, how do you determine that your story is complete and it is time to stop redrafting?

A.

Writing helps me think, so seldom is a story complete in my head, or even nearly complete in my head, before I take up a pen. I usually hear a character talking, then imagine what kind of trouble she or he could be in or could create, but don't know really until after a few false starts, a large number of pages in the trash. And I do write in longhand first, partly because, as I said, writing helps me think, and partly because I am a terrible typist.

The average number of drafts is hard to say because I do not always get to the end of one draft before I can tell it will go nowhere and discard it. That does not mean I give up on the story or the character, but what normally happens is I get ten or so pages into something and know I have to take a different approach, devise a different plot or technique. I go through about five false starts like that before I get a complete draft, then that one is re-done about five more times (usually twice more before I type it into my PC), and then finally edited and fine-tuned once or twice more after that. I try to let it sit then, go on to something else and come back in a few weeks for one more revision.

I know it is finished when I have a sense something happened, or the character changed or learned or the reader did. I stop rewriting when the story has a unity. I think of the finished stories as softball sized balls of wax--an odd image, I know--all neatly stuck together and making one form. Some stories, though, never get finished, and even after they are published, I tinker with lines here or there, re-combine sentences and move commas about.

Q.

Are you currently working on any other projects?

A.

I have just put together another collection of stories all set in Hawai'i, and I am looking for a publisher for that one now. And I recently completed a novel tentatively titled *Beauties*. It takes up where the title story in this collection leaves off, is told in alternating points of view by the two women in "The Alibi Café," Bev and Shelly. I liked doing that so much, I may try another novel soon.