



AN INTERVIEW WITH  
JAIMEE WRISTON COLBERT

AUTHOR OF

DREAM LIVES OF  
**BUTTERFLIES**  
STORIES



BY KAREN I. JOHNSON

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*This story collection centers on people who live in a brick apartment complex in St. Louis. Collectively, the characters have been described as gritty, yet tender. Can you elaborate on that characterization?*

*Dream Lives of Butterflies* is about the have-nots at the end of the 1990s, a time in America when the rich were getting much richer, and even many of the not-so-rich but lucky enough to have stock were seeing figures in their portfolios undreamed of. My book is about the people this boom left behind. People who are largely uneducated, and even with some education are not living lives of the affluent. My characters struggle with the basics of every day life and can't envision a future that is anything beyond this struggle, yet on they push. It is this will and determination, a sort of economic survivalism, that to me defines a certain dignity, or "grit." At the same time, like anyone else, they long for love: to love, to be loved, for it is love in whatever form it's offered: child, animal, partner, mate, friend, that makes the daily struggle worthwhile. To me this is tenderness, an emotion born of longing and loneliness, the need to find—and hold onto—love.

*Reading stories about down-on-their-luck characters can be depressing. Reading your collection is a very different experience. These are definitely not dark stories. To what do you attribute that?*

The short answer—humor. These characters, despite the odds against them, bumble on. Although we might be tempted to see their lives as "down and out" and the lack of

opportunities to change this "depressing," they don't define their own lives that way, and they have developed coping methods that we as readers might recognize as such, but to them it's just the way things are. Consider Marybeth, whose comfort is found in a bottle of red wine and talking to Jesus, whom she's convinced is outside her bedroom window. Or Lucy, who moves from man to man merely for a bed to sleep in. Her goal is to be a Victoria Secret underwear model. I think when you bring together a cast of characters who have pluck, that "grit," a gusto for life, despite its often enormous difficulties, you get a humorous, if dark, dynamic that keeps the reader from feeling sorry for them, and instead is rooting for them. "Go Lucy!" we say, when she convinces a bewildered Troy to let her move in with him for a month, despite the fact that they have just met.

*Your roots are in Hawai'i and so are the roots of many of your characters. They and other transplanted characters pine for their homes. Do you share your characters' longing for home and how does that longing affect these stories?*

Displacement from home—and all that means both literally and metaphorically—is one of my prevalent themes as a writer. All three of my books have this at their hearts. One of the reviewers of my second book thought it a little strange that with a Maine setting, three principle characters were from Hawai'i. What are the odds of that, she pondered? Well, not so improbable, alas. As the oldest child in a large family, my parents sent me to the mainland for college. They thought I needed a broader educational experience. They relented with my brothers, who all at various times

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in their lives ended up in Hawai'i. I never did, except for visits and one blissful summer teaching creative writing at the school I graduated from. Furthermore, between my husband's career and my own, we have lived in eight different states, the itinerant academics. The result is that I have never felt truly at home anywhere, and just when I started to love a place, such as Maine, for varying reasons we ended up moving. When I do go back to Hawai'i I feel mostly out of place, a coast "haole" who can't even speak the pidgin English anymore of a "local." This has been sad for me, and it is this longing for some kind of a home that leeches into the lives of my characters, who are often equally displaced and dispossessed.

*When did you first plan to write stories centered in one apartment building or did that just happen one story at a time?*

When I was a visiting writer at the University of Missouri-St. Louis—a position that I loved and credit with the origins of this book—I lived in an apartment complex near the campus. It was not an affluent area, but it felt comfortable to me and I found myself interested in the dynamics of my neighbors, the ways people live together in these large brick buildings joined by paths, yet still managing to have their own very private lives. I did what I do when I find people or a situation interesting: I wrote several stories. I didn't know until I had maybe five or six of these stories, and some of the characters that were in the initial stories reappeared, that I was working on this book!

*How did you select St. Louis as the setting?*

I enjoyed being the "Distinguished Visiting Writer" at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and I grew to really like St. Louis! Although the apartment complex in my book is in St. Louis, what happens to the people, the sort of lives they live—that grit, that struggle, economic hardships, the tenderness talked about earlier in this interview—could be transposed to many other cities in America. St. Louis was an especially effective setting though, given its status as the "Gateway to the West," the incomparable Mississippi River and that amazing arch—ready-made metaphors for a writer exploring the physical as well as emotional landscapes of these characters' lives.

*Butterflies are a theme in many of the stories—both scientifically and metaphorically. What is your interest in butterflies and how do they influence these stories?*

I have always been fascinated by insects, particularly butterflies. When I was a child I wanted to be an entomologist—until I discovered how much math that would entail! I have poignant memories of playing under the crown flower bushes in my grandparents' Kailua back yard. These are the beautiful plants that in Hawai'i monarch butterflies are drawn to. Lovely leis are made with the flowers. I collected the fat monarch caterpillars, punching holes in the jar tops and placing them inside with crown flower leaves. I watched them spin their cocoons, watched the cocoons darken and become transparent, watched the wings take shape, and when they hatched, I very carefully released the butterfly outside on the crown flower bushes. I was fascinated by the physicality of this

metamorphosis and remain so to this day. (Though I no longer put caterpillars in jars!) St. Louis has a wonderful butterfly house that I spent time in, which pretty much inspired the title story. Butterflies are so beautiful, so vulnerable and fragile, and so necessary to the ecology of this planet. That many of their species are threatened by global warming and other travesties of our post-millennium world seemed an appropriate, if disturbing, metaphor for my book.

*These stories poke and prod relationships of all kinds—mother/daughter, father/daughter, husband/wife, grandparent/grandchild. Using Julia as an example: How does Julia's relationship with her mother change in the course of these stories?*

When Carol, Julia's mother, is shipped to St. Louis from Hawai'i by Maggie, Julia's sister, Julia is resentful of the intrusion and perplexed by how to care for her mother, who has been exhibiting odd behavioral mannerisms. Furthermore, Julia's relationship with her mother has always been problematic. She believes her mother neither appreciates her nor understands her. But really it's she who doesn't understand her mother. She's particularly resentful of her mother for being what she felt was a doormat in her marriage to Julia's father. In a story told by Carol, the readers hear another viewpoint. In the final Carol/Julia

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story, “And Another Thing,” this situation comes full circle, allowing Julia to see her mother in a different way.

*Another character, Marybeth, experiences multiple losses, yet she perseveres. Marybeth talks about and sees Jesus. How does religion serve her as a character?*

Religion for Marybeth is almost more physical than it is spiritual. She literally imagines Jesus a “best friend” sort of presence, one who is as comforting as he is sometimes annoying. As a child brought up in the Catholic Church (only without the church itself!) she experienced varying amounts of guilt for the explorations of her own sexuality, culminating in the teenage pregnancy and delivery of a stillborn that she believes was somehow her fault. At various points in her stories it is this physical Jesus who rescues her. In the end he is almost like an imagined lover, and it’s him that she’s running away to meet. It’s up to the readers to determine how “real” this potential encounter is.

*Neville’s mother hated the use of the word “unit” instead of apartment. It was as if the residents had no home and their existence was something to be measured. What social message should be taken from these stories?*

As discussed previously, these characters don’t have a lot of choices. They can’t afford their own homes and some of them, such as Neville’s family, are living in the rent-subsidized apartments, several buildings in the overall complex. As such, they are forced to abide by others’ rules, which can be dehumanizing—and thus her view of the term “unit” as “something measured,” rather than one’s home and the comforts that word implies. The social message here is pretty straightforward: it is unfair that in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, the super-rich are buying third vacation homes and people like Neville’s family, her father a Vietnam vet who served his country and has ended up disabled with post-traumatic stress disorder, can barely scrape together a day-to-day living; their residence is owned by someone else, thus their lives also, to a certain extent, are determined by someone else. Freedom is a lot more “free” for those who can afford it.

*Lucy Luck seeks a career as a model for Victoria’s Secret. How did your early experience as a model influence Lucy’s aspirations?*

Hah! This is a funny question. OK, first I better emphasize I never aspired to be a V.S. model. I think that catalogue is an insult to all women, regardless of their shape. Lucy’s earnest attempts at “pooching” out her lips to mimic those models—well, yeah, that’s this former-model author mocking them. (Of course I’d take their salary any day.) Admittedly I was never comfortable in the modeling world, though as a stringy, awkward, super-tall bookish child the fact that I was desired as a model was an inner triumph—I’d

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have to be honest about that. I could never reconcile my own intelligence with having to shut my mouth and be a living, breathing clothes hanger. And in those times of “women’s liberation” and active feminism (as opposed to the so called post-feminism that’s being touted these days), I felt like a hypocrite, all made up and alluring to sell some outfit to women who wouldn’t

look good in it, to make money for someone else who didn’t need it. So Lucy, who has more confidence and spirit than I ever had at her age (what was at one time described as “pluck”), also has fewer choices. She doesn’t have parents who will help her pay for college; she doesn’t even have a mother who wants her in the house so she can finish high school! But she does have a long, thin body with big “yoohoos,” and she’s going to use what she has to get by. I have to admire that!

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