



## An Interview with Andrew Plattner

author of the new short-story collection

### *A Marriage of Convenience*

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Interview by Deirdre Mikolajcik



*Your father managed a racetrack. What has it been like to go from growing up amid horse racing to writing about it?*

I spent the formative years of my life around the racetrack, and I have spent the years after that writing about the racetrack. The racetrack is fairly colorful and full of surprises; in this way I have been very fortunate. When I think of the racetrack and its importance when I was younger, I think of that line in *Goodfellas* when Henry Hill says—with just the slightest hint of sentimentality—“It was where I met the world.” He says this because as a boy he is constantly in the company of gangsters, men who will forever shape his outlook. Of course, I am not stating here that racetrackers are gangsters. But when you choose the racetrack you are choosing a lifestyle and you are choosing to be in the company of people who are less inclined to worry about the rules. This had enormous appeal to me when I was growing up.

There are some parallels to be found in writing about horse racing. I like to think the stories I write in a way resemble the racetrack people I used to know. Each has its own outlook, set of sensibilities, sense of humor and peculiarities. There are rules—and some very good ones—to follow in story writing. But, when the opportunity arises, some rules can be ignored. With pleasure.

*Did this collection start with a single story or was there an overarching theme that inspired it?*

The stories pretty much arrived one at a time. There wasn't an attempt to make a connection from one story to the next. The characters in them were inspired by people and personal experiences. I would see little things about a person and then bring this to a story and see what happened. Some of the racetrack characters were created with real-life racetrack people in mind. But not all.

For example, the title story, “A Marriage of Convenience.” Actually, a couple of students in a literature class I was teaching at Clayton State were the models for the brothers Joe and Marian. In this class, I had two students who were non-traditional, about 10 years older than all of the other traditional students in the class. Anytime I had the class work in groups, these two guys stuck together. I think both of them were unsure about being back in college, and the one guy sort of looked out for the other guy in classroom discussions because they were both pretty nervous overall about participating in class. In the story, Joe and Marian look out for one another. It's quiet, they don't make a lot of speeches, profess their loyalty aloud. In fact, both of them are a little uneasy about the fact they have to lean on each other so much. But, of course, they have the least dysfunctional relationship in the story.

Other stories arrived in other ways. There is a very short story in the collection called “Caught.” One afternoon my wife came home from work and showed me a comic book she had picked up at some used-book store. It was called *Mythical Sea Monsters*. I started the story the next day.

*Some of these stories have endings filled with light while others end in darkness. Was one type of ending more difficult to write than the other? If so, which one was more difficult for you?*

I don't think one is more difficult to write than the other. Generally speaking, the story takes you where it needs to go. It jumps into your taxi and says, “Okay take a left up here, a right at the light.” You just press down on the gas, hang onto the wheel.

A couple of stories in *A Marriage of Convenience* feature a narrator trying to deal with the emotions brought on by his brother's suicide. Both stories, for whatever reason, feature a lot of jokes. I certainly didn't plan on that, but it's what happened while I was writing them. So, I didn't try to fight it.

Obviously, if you are a serious writer, you cannot be worried about the darkness at all. It is usually pretty interesting once you find yourself there. But, I like positive endings, too. In particular, the ending for the story “Decade” certainly was a surprise for me. I didn’t see that coming. But, it is earned. The characters, the husband and his wife, did all the work there.

*Your stories have a variety of characters in them, from teenage runaways to bookies. How did you get into the minds of all these different characters to make them so real?*

There is a commonality between the characters in this collection. When I take a broad view of them, I guess each protagonist has a sense that they have missed out on something important. Still, they are trying to tell themselves it’s all right. They are trying to make themselves feel better, or trying to tell themselves what they have missed out on doesn’t really matter. These people live in my world, so I don’t think it’s a stretch to suggest I think and feel this way myself. These are not issues of bad luck, however. It seems pretty human to feel this way. How one chooses to acknowledge it is part of what makes that individual strange and unique.

Choosing who is the narrator or protagonist of any story always has everything to do with which character best shines the light on that story’s central ideas. In the story, “Welcome,” I tried a draft where the son, JT, was the protagonist and the story’s interesting angles all seemed to disappear at once. It’s the father’s story, that’s what this little experiment told me. But sometimes you have to make the mistake to understand what the right decision is for any story.

*I really enjoyed your story “Gremlin” because of the main character Valerie, a jockey. Was she based on someone you know or encountered? If so, did you stay true to life or did she take on a life of her own once you started working on the story? If not, how did she start out and grow to the final character before us?*

The first draft of this story featured a male narrator, a horse trainer, who needs to get licensed by a state racing commission. He creates a false identity, gets the proper-looking paperwork in order, and then when he arrives at the racing-commission office, it turns out the female receptionist there is an ex-jockey named Valerie Perry whom he’d had an experience with two decades

earlier. While the man seeking the trainer’s license sits in the lobby of the racing commission, wondering whether or not the receptionist will (a) recognize

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him or (b) turn him in, there is a flashback to the time they spent together. While I was working on this story, the flashback became more interesting than the scene at the racing-commission office, so the racing-commission-office scene hit the waste bin. Once it was clear that Valerie needed to be the narrator, the story became more complex and surprising. Valerie, to me, seems a younger, more inexperienced version of Helen Patek, who is the protagonist of “Runaway.” When I was working at the racetrack, I met a few women riders and exercise girls, and both Valerie and Helen are composites of these women to some degree. I suppose my fondness for them is obvious. But when I think of Valerie or Helen, I don’t think it’s their femaleness that defines them; it’s their age, experience—or, in Valerie’s case, the lack of it—and their honesty. I think of my other characters this way, be they bookmakers or gamblers or anyone else who has found themselves fighting with melancholy and despair.

*As someone who spends his time writing, what books and authors are you reading?*

*The Magic of Blood* by Dagoberto Gilb, *Lord of Misrule* by Jaimy Gordon and Steve Barthelme’s *The Early Posthumous Work* are the latest books I have read. All winners. Writers I refer to consistently when I find myself lacking in purpose and/or direction also include Hemingway, Paley, Orwell, Chekhov, and Camus.

*What are you planning to write next?*

I recently completed another story collection that is not dissimilar in subject matter to *A Marriage of Convenience*. I have longer works in progress, but these are like my stories in that they need many drafts. Hopefully, I will have one of these longer manuscripts completed sometime soon. 