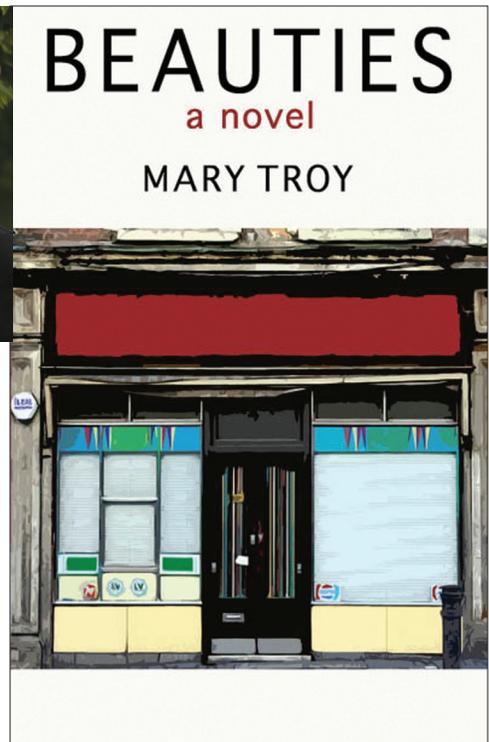


An Interview with
Mary Troy
author of **BEAUTIES**

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with Karen I. Johnson



Beauties is your first novel after publishing three collections of short stories. The novel's setting, the Alibi Café in St. Louis, was first introduced to readers in The Alibi Café and Other Stories in 2003. What is the process of creating a novel from the small gem of a short story and how different has it been for you to write a novel?

To write a short story, I create a world for the characters to inhabit, so there was much I already knew about Shelly and Bev before I decided to turn the story into a novel. But I did have to expand the world I had made for them. I had to learn even more about them. And Shelly surprised me. In “The Alibi Café” story, she says she is beautiful, and as I worked on her character, I understood that her beauty is of great importance to her. Not only is she beautiful, but she comes from a family of beauties. Her beauty, though, does not help her cope with the world any more than Bev’s deformities help her. Moreover, in the expansion, I gave both cousins more solid backgrounds—parents and grandparents, childhoods, old friends, talents, past successes, and mistakes, and present time needs, yearnings, desires. I wanted to see how equipped either of them would be to get what she wanted, to know what it was she wanted. A need that is already clear in the short story is Bev’s desire to be a mother, so I made the child—called TJ in the story—one who could be adopted, a foster child, to give Bev at least a shot at him. I changed his race initially to make it harder for her. And I already knew her problem dealing with authorities would get in her way. I wanted Shelly to have needs, too, and it dawned on me early on she needed something to excel at, needed applause and attention, the kind of thing she used to get when crowned the pageant winner. And she most needed it from her family. I decided earning her family’s approval for anything but looks would be difficult, though, for no matter what they said, they only valued one thing—beauty.

So that was my starting point, or more precisely where I came to after at least a month of false starts. Naturally, I surprised myself often as I created, and characters like Mike and Ted and Maddie showed up. I did not know if either Bev or Shelly would get what she wanted. I had to write the novel to find out.

Beauties is told in alternating first-person voices by Bev and Shelly. It can be fun for the reader to see the same situation from two very different perspectives. Bev and Shelly who, despite their family ties as cousins, are very different personalities. Bev is serious and cynical; Shelly seems to trip through life being optimistic.

Shelly tells us that she is “the prettiest of a pretty family.” She begins to dream of the café getting great reviews and even becoming a trained chef herself. Bev was born with only one finger and no thumbs and one leg that ended above the knee after her mother took medication for morning sickness while pregnant. Bev tells of receiving her first artificial knee when she was five years old, a gift from Santa. Bev dreams of adopting Toby, a child in foster care who visits the Alibi Café often.

How do these two very different cousins manage to live and work together at the Alibi Café? How did you develop this alternating structure for the novel or did it just happen as you were writing?

I see Shelly as trying to be optimistic, not as a natural optimist, for she must talk herself into it by playing games. For instance, she tells herself often to expect the worst so that whatever happens will be better than she thought and she will be happy. But to answer your question, they do not live together well at first, nor work too well together either. One thing that makes the working easier is that only one of them, Shelly, cares about the café, so the conflicts are less serious. And because of Bev’s deformities, Shelly and the rest of her family have long accustomed themselves to agreeing with her, to second guessing themselves to say Bev is probably right or justified in being wrong. So that habit helps Shelly at times.

I prefer third person stories, and so usually want to write in third person, but a trick I use in the beginning of a story or novel is to write each character in first person to teach me what they care about, will admit to, and to learn how they will speak. I started with Shelly for she was the biggest mystery to me, and I discovered I liked her way of understanding and not understanding the world. I realized she could tell part of the story herself and would be happy to do so. But with her attitude of forced optimism and her narrow focus that created a lack of understanding of what was right in front of her, she could not tell the whole story. So Bev would have to carry half at least. It took me a while to figure that out. Then the problem was that they were cousins, and cousins who had been raised in the same neighborhood and gone to the same schools. I didn’t want them to sound so similar the reader wouldn’t know who was speaking. Bev was better educated, but mostly the difference was in attitude and personality. I decided the point

• An Interview with Mary Troy, author of BEAUTIES •

of view may be risky, but if I could make it work, it still seemed right. That decision was further complicated as the novel grew, for I wanted each of their voices to shift a bit, wanted them to take on some of the attitudes of each other.

Beauties takes place in South St. Louis. I know you are a native of St. Louis and teach there now, but is this neighborhood one with which you have a special connection?

I was raised in a small town north of St. Louis which is now part of St. Louis County. When I lived there it was a small town surrounded by farms, but close enough to the city that my friends and I would take the bus to downtown St. Louis for fun and shopping. My parents eventually moved to a closer-in suburb, I moved to Honolulu, Hawai'i, then to a small college town in Arkansas for graduate school. So, when my husband and I moved to St. Louis for teaching jobs after graduate school and took a flat in South St. Louis because it was inexpensive, the area was as new to me as to him. The section known as South St. Louis is made of rows and rows and miles and miles of close-set brick buildings, flats up and down. From its beginning and up through the '60s, maybe the '70s, the area was known as Dutchtown, a solid, middle-class, blue-collar area once populated by European immigrants. But the old places were not as easy to keep up as the new places, and urban sprawl did there what it did to other cities, and soon many left behind were poor. Of course, as in most cities in the nation, gentrification and rehabbing began, but in isolated sections. Living there was not entirely a pleasant experience, but one full of stories. Oddly, it seemed more foreign to me than Hawai'i did, and thus intriguing.

The Alibi Cafe never existed on Meramec Street, but I can see it there. I used to walk around that area and I know just where it could be. When I began writing this novel, I no longer lived in the city, but I drove back to it on

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—Mary Troy

occasion, parked in the alley behind my old home, listened to the sounds, tried to absorb the feel once again.

The Alibi Café and Shelly's growing expertise in food preparation and dreams of culinary fame share the spotlight in Beauties. What part does the diner play in this drama?

I can say that as a kitchen is the center of a home, the café is the center of this novel. It is Bev's retreat first of all, her escape from “that teaching fiasco.” And it soon becomes the location for Shelly's planned success, her reason for being. It is also where Bev meets Toby and it is the source of Bev's largesse for Mike and Toby and Maddie, and even Ted, as well as the place both cousins meet others in the neighborhood. So the diner is the center of Bev and Shelly's lives. And though some of the dishes Shelly creates are not good, I wanted to be sure many did work out, because Shelly's cooking here is like an art in that the end result does not always match the intention, the imagined result, but new and good things can be and are created. And the doing of it is at least partially its own reward.

The other women of the Stillwell family pride themselves on their beauty. Most have won beauty contests, including Aunt Peg who was crowned Senior Ms. St. Louis Metropolitan Area. Shelly and Bev grew up only a block from each other and Bev does not fit the physical criteria of “the Stillwell beauties.” What does Beauties say about beauty?

An obvious comparison using Shelly and Bev is inner vs. outer beauty, and of course inner is more worthwhile for the outer is superficial and fleeting. But is Bev beautiful inside? She is cynical and crabby. She disdains most of the world she lives in. Perhaps that is a mark of intelligence and thus a sort of beauty. But the truth here is Shelly and four others in her family are beautiful in all the traditional meanings our culture gives the word. Their faces and hair and skin tone and shapes and measurements and muscle definition and coloring and posture, etc. etc. are what women are taught to aim for. They are physically beautiful. Bev is not, and no one would ever call her beautiful except her family who do it out of a sense of kindness, though it reminds Bev how far removed she is from the ideal, and tells her how little else she has to offer.

On the other hand, Bev and Shelly both come to be beautiful inside by caring for each other and their families, by protecting each other, by reaching out to others who need help or advice, by getting out of themselves and becoming more than they were when they first moved in above the café.

And physical beauty gets in the way of happiness for Shelly, for her mother, and for Aunt Peg, too, who missed her own wedding reception because of her singed eyebrows. So beauty may be as much a curse as deformity, and surely is like a deformity in that it makes Shelly different from the world she so much wants to be a part of.

What writers first influenced your work as you have continued your writing?

I still consider my high school Honors English class one of the highlights of my life, and so like many writers, I wanted at first to be another Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor, Orwell, Steinbeck, or Salinger. As an English major in college, I added Chekhov to the list, as well as Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf. Those were writers I admired for being able to make me forget where I lived and what my name was, made me feel as if a good friend had gone once I finished a book. By now I have added Jean Rhys, Alice Munro, Richard Yates, Frank O'Connor, William Trevor, Tobias Wolfe, and Lewis Nordan. Of course, there are many I have left off that list, and there are so many writers I admire now, some my friends and some I've yet to meet. I think we are living in a time of great writing, so much of it better than ever. 