



An Interview with Laura Maylene Walter

— by Nicholas Sawin

Q. *Congratulations on your selection for the G.S. Sharat Chandra Prize for Short Fiction. What themes do you see under the umbrella of your new book's title: Living Arrangements? How do you see these stories forming a cohesive collection?*

A. I'm thrilled to be the Chandra Prize winner and have my debut collection published by BkMk Press, so thank you.

I wrote the stories in *Living Arrangements* over a period of about five years. At the time, I didn't realize I was building a collection—I was just writing short stories. But of course certain themes emerged, and I eventually saw that I might have a collection on my hands.

I have always considered the story "Living Arrangements" to be the heart of this collection. It introduces the theme

of searching for a place in the world and feeling that something vital has been left in the past. Just as the narrator in the title story returns to visit her former homes, the other characters in the collection are determining where they belong and, often, reconciling the past as they move forward.

Q. *In the title story, your protagonist's whole life unfolds through the succession of homes she occupies. Do you consider place, particularly the home, to reflect the characters within? What inspiration do you derive from place in your stories? As an unapologetic coffee shop writer, does your sense of your own place have an effect on your work?*

A. I grew up in Lancaster, PA, and still feel a strong connection to the landscapes there—the rolling hills, the valleys, the farmland, the rural back roads. I haven't lived there for years, and every time I go back I feel simultaneously linked to my hometown and also distanced from it. I can never return to how it was for me to grow up there, but sometimes I wish I could. Some of the characters in this collection feel the same way, including the narrator in the title story, who has left parts of herself behind in her former homes.

And yes, "unapologetic coffee shop writer" is a good way to describe me. As recently as several years ago, I couldn't imagine doing the majority of my writing in public. I have since found, however, that removing myself from the distractions of home and physically relocating to a different place can jumpstart my writing sessions. My ideal place to

write would be a private cabin in the woods somewhere, but since that's not a possibility right now, the local café will have to do the trick.

Q. *Your short stories often feature thorny or even toxic mother-daughter relationships such as Shelly and her mother in “The Clarinet,” Tabitha and Gladys in “A System Based on Counting,” and Caroline and Joyce in “Return to Stillbrook Farm.” While in other interviews you have made a distinction between your characters and your own biography, how do you walk that line between personal revelation and fictional reimagining in your work? How has your own mother’s death from cancer influenced your fiction?*

A. I was 20 years old when my mother died, rather suddenly, from cancer. For several years after her death, I wrote about grief and death and mothers and daughters. While I’ve mostly moved past those themes, they continue to occasionally emerge in my writing in one form or another.

It’s true that some stories in *Living Arrangements*, as well as my current novel in progress, feature strained or toxic mother-daughter relationships. Here I need to point out that my mom wasn’t anything like my fictional mothers—she and I were very close and had a positive relationship. I think these themes in my fiction reveal my continued exploration of loss and severed mother-daughter relationships. Only in these cases, the divide is caused by conflict instead of death.

As is the case with many writers, my fiction may sometimes contain autobiographical elements, but I branch out and make things up until I can barely recognize the story’s original catalyst. For example, I played the clarinet as a child, just like the narrator in “The Clarinet,” and I rode horses like Caroline in “Return to Stillbrook Farm.” (Sadly, I was not nearly as talented or as accomplished at these activities as my characters.) But that is largely where the similarities end—the events take on a new life for me on the page.

Q. *In “To Elizabeth Bishop, with Love,” an unnamed narrator pens a letter to the deceased poet and short story writer, offering a gloomy take on the fate of literature in the modern world of technology and media obsession. Do you share her concerns, as an author and a blogger?*

A. I suppose I do, though I’d like to point out that the narrator’s circumstances—both as a middle school teacher and as someone suffering from a health crisis—prompt her to be more negative about these things than I would be. I do worry, however, that the simple act of sitting down and quietly reading for several hours is becoming an increasingly rare practice, particularly among young people, and that does concern me.

On the other hand, what do I know? I’m not a teacher or librarian and I also can’t discount the recent surge in the popularity of YA novels. But yes, it’s something that has crossed my mind.

Q. *In this collection, women explore and broaden objectified roles, such as a lingerie model in a shop window (“Live Model”) and a figure skater performing before a stalker (“The Ballad Solemn of Lady Malena”). What interests you about examining the superficiality or the beauty of women on display?*

A. These are issues that most young girls face as they grow up, even if on a subconscious level, as they internalize the fact that they are on display in the world as sexual beings. How does this impact a girl or young woman’s gathering understanding of herself and her place in the world? How does she rise above, or at least confront, these realities? Those were questions I had in mind while writing these particular stories.

The young woman in “Live Model” has spent her entire life being judged—in a negative light—solely for her unusual physical appearance; she only begins to receive some semi-positive attention when she models lingerie. Yet she has a lively sense of humor and rich inner life. Similarly, Annabelle in “The Ballad Solemn of Lady Malena,” who is growing up in the strict confines of the elite figure skating world, tries for the first time to claim some control over her circumstances. I wanted to give these young women their own voices and a more complete picture of who they are aside from their perceived sex appeal (or lack thereof).

Q. *How do you balance being a writer, wife, cat owner, journalist, trade magazine editor, and blogger (at LauraMayleneWalter.com)? Do you find that these roles bleed into each other? Does your role as a fiction writer shape your voice as an essayist or journalist, and vice-versa? Are there advantages to moving between these genres?*

A. Balance is the key word. I'm the type of person who always tries to do everything at once, to add yet another activity or deadline to my plate, but sometimes that just isn't possible. I've had to learn the art of focusing on one thing and letting certain others go—at least for the moment.

I've worked as an editor of a trade magazine for the last four years, and despite the fact that it consumes a lot of mental energy, it's had a positive impact on my creative work. I'm a perfectionist, which means I'm inclined to agonize over a piece of writing forever, second-guess myself, and wait as long as possible before showing it to someone else (writing groups excluded—I have no shame when it comes to submitting work to be critiqued). As anyone in journalism knows, this kind of hesitancy just isn't possible while writing on deadline.

My job has helped me learn to write faster, edit faster, pull pieces together faster, and then get it out there and get on with it. Fiction demands a different type of creative process, of course, but my day job has strengthened my ability to simply sit down and get to work. Similarly, my personal blog has improved some aspects of both my professional work and my fiction—it's just more writing practice and another way to learn how to organize my thoughts, write honestly, and let my voice emerge. The blog might be time consuming, but I'm not convinced my fiction has suffered for it. I steal the time I use to blog from other activities.

I'm fortunate to have a husband who is supportive of my writing; I can't even imagine him complaining about the hours I spend holed up in cafés with my laptop. Finally, while I like to joke about being a cat lady, my cats don't add much to my busy schedule—except when they interrupt my writing or reading to demand attention, which, frankly, they probably deserve.

Q. *How have your literary tastes changed over the years? What writers have influenced or inspired your work? Which authors do you consider to be kindred spirits? Do you consider yourself to be writing from a certain tradition?*

A. I love Ann Patchett and Margaret Atwood. Books like *Evening* by Susan Minot, *Anywhere But Here* by Mona Simpson, *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss, *Unless* by Carol Shields, and *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout are also inspirations. I love the magic in Aimee Bender's fiction, and I try to keep that sort of playfulness in mind while writing pieces like "Live Model."

Q. *What's next for you? With the publication of your first book, what writerly goals have you set for yourself?*

A. I've been working on a novel for the past few years. The manuscript has received some recognition in the form of an Ohioana grant and a fellowship runner-up designation, but I still can't say how close the novel is to being finished. It's a slow, evolutionary process.

In addition to the novel, I'm working on more short stories—I've been flooded with new ideas these days—as well as some personal essays. My goal is to eventually publish a novel and a second short story collection. But to quote Isak Dinesen, I'm ultimately trying to write "without hope and without despair."

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