



AN INTERVIEW WITH
**KERRY NEVILLE
BAKKEN**

AUTHOR OF

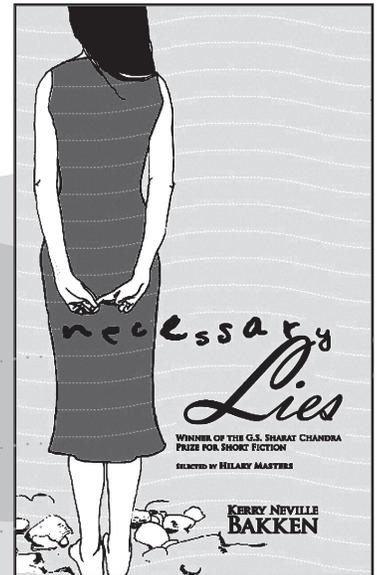
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WINNER OF THE G.S. SHARAT CHANDRA
PRIZE FOR SHORT FICTION

SELECTED BY HILARY MASTERS

Lies

BY J.J. CANTRELL



WINNER OF THE BKMK PRESS G.S. SHARAT CHANDRA SHORT FICTION PRIZE, SELECTED BY HILARY MASTERS

ISBN 1-886157-56-1, \$14.95, 200 pages, trade paper, August 2006

BkMk Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 5101 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, MO 64110, (816)235-2558, www.umkc.edu/bkmk

The first story in the collection, “The Effects of Light,” opens with Jack and his soon-to-be ex-wife, Sarah, traveling to Greece to collect the body of his sister. When they arrive, Sarah finds herself “at a loss. Her guidebook has not prepared her for this.” Later, in “Necessary Lies,” the main character, Mike, finds himself unsure how to deal with a suicidal female student. Many of your protagonists find themselves having to quickly adapt to new situations, situations where the rules aren’t clearly established. Was this a theme you consciously developed in these stories?

I’ve never really thought about it as “adapting,” but certainly I tend to write about those moments when characters are forced to come up with new ways or more complex ways of responding to the world, to lovers or friends or family. Whenever I walk through the self-help section of a bookstore, I’m always astounded by the absolute confidence of the titles, those “prescriptives” the so-called experts offer for how to live longer, better, happier, more authentically. You know, the “Ten Ways to Strengthen the Sado-Masochistic Bond with Your Slave,” or “The Perfect Life in Four Million Easy, Obsessive-Compulsive Steps.” I used to work at a bookstore when I was in high school and I’d watch the way people paced the self-help aisle—nervously, shamefully, hoping that there might suddenly be the title that would summarize and promise the cure for their crisis. And there never was—is, I suppose. Sure, maybe there’s the *Feeling Good Workbook*, but will it speak to a guy like Mike or his student? To their particular loneliness and failure? Frank O’Connor, in his marvelous book *The Lonely Voice* argues that the short story has as its central axis an “intense awareness of human loneliness.” And this might be developed then, in stories, as a tragic awareness

that can end only in despair. Or an ironic awareness—there are those writers who don’t believe in human resiliency, who stand at a distance from their characters, poking at them with hot irons, who seem to doubt that their characters might have the capacity to adapt, to come up with something they hadn’t imagined and save, if not their lives, then those moments that can feel like a life. All of this is a roundabout way of saying that I have faith in my characters, in their abilities to find mercy and grace in unexpected ways.

In “The Effects of Light” Kate, Jack’s sister, writes to him and explains that Greece is beautiful but she sees too much. “Sarah would understand the damage all this light can do.” You and your husband spend the summers in Greece. What is it about the light and shadows of Greece that compelled you to write this story?

Greece is for lovers, right? That’s the sale pitch. And certainly when you wander Santorini or Mykonos you see lovers everywhere. Honeymooners, especially, gazing ga-ga over sunsets, mooning over all the friendly (read hungry and horny) cats, hung over from too much ouzo, too much sun. Everyone wants their postcard of Greece. And yet, at every bend, there’s a ragged cliff that skitters down to the sea accompanied by an iconostasis, a tiny little shrine, like an ornate mailbox, perched alongside the road. They often look like miniature churches. Inside, there’s usually an oil lamp or candle burning or burned out, and a picture of a saint. These shrines often signify one of two things: either someone is thanking a saint, or God, for saving his life (i.e., not plummeting over the cliff) or someone has motorcycled off the cliff and this is the memorial. These shrines are ubiquitous and serve, at least for me, as warnings.

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You know, you may be on the most romantic drive of your life, you may be thumbing olives into your lover's mouth, licking oregano from his lips, you may take the plunge and bare your breasts at the beach, but don't forget that you can die here too.

My husband and I take students to Greece for a writing course most summers and our students initially believe in the postcard—and then we get to Thessaloniki, a city in Northern Greece, the city from which the Nazis held Greece. And we take them on a walking tour, stopping in the chic, palm and café-lined, sun-dazzled Aristotelous Square, and then tell them that here in 1943 the Nazis rounded up the city's 45,000 Jews (at the time, the largest Sephardic Jewish population in the world next to Jerusalem and one-fifth of Thessaloniki's entire population) in order to ship them out on trains to the concentration camps where most of them would die. And my husband and I watch as our students struggle to literally re-see what was once here and now is not.

So it seems to me that you can go to Greece and be dazzled by the light, by the often empty beauty, the stark landscape of the islands: the blue chairs, the bottle of olive oil, the dish of olives, the red poppies tumbling down a rocky crag, the whitewashed houses; but this emptiness, this sunny absence is absence, erasure, the placeholder for the many lost histories. Most Americans think about Greece in two ways: as an ancient place, home to the great warriors and thinkers, and as a place for lovers and lightness. We often forget its modern history and its attendant shadows: population exchanges, Nazi occupation, Jewish eradication, the Junta. And while my story, "The Effects of Light," is not a political story in any way, it does try to contend with the shadows.

In several of the stories, the settings are so well established and richly drawn that they become as much a character as the people. How do you wed the protagonists to their landscapes?

The short answer? Place matters. It has to matter since it's where characters live out their lives. Gaston Bachelard, the French philosopher, writes that "if we want to determine the profound reality of all the subtle shadings of our attachment for a chosen spot...we should have to say how we inhabit our vital space, in accord with all the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a 'corner of the world.'" This is the task I have given myself as a writer (or perhaps one that

has given itself to me) whose stories in this collection are set, not arbitrarily, but specifically on Long Island. I have tried to show how this place becomes a "vital space" for characters who choose to live there, rooted in the day-to-day struggle of balancing contrary dreams.

I know the cost of these dreams, how they can fragment, split, and lose shape, how they can be subsumed, pulled under by new, unexpected desires. I was (am?) an eavesdropper who hovered on the stairs, hoarded the bits and pieces of conversations gathered at block party barbecues, at accidental meetings between neighbors in doctors' offices. And especially at kaffee klatches, the female version of King Arthur's Round Table, where I was mesmerized by the rise and fall of women's voices, by women trying to make sense of their histories and their families to each other, to themselves. After all, I grew up alongside (in the most general geographic sense) Amy Fisher, a girl from the South Shore of Long Island who, one day after school, in between appointments with johns, in the middle of all that suburban kitsch and repression, showed up on her older and married lover's doorstep and shot his wife in the head. This kind of passion—defeated, grotesque, sad, and sometimes even wonderful—lives inside all those carefully planned suburbs, inside all those carefully planned-for lives.

Most of the stories in the collection are set, as you describe them, in the "degraded suburbs of Long Island." You grew up in Queens and Long Island, but you've also lived in Houston for six years during graduate school, and now you've found yourself in a small town on the western edge of Pennsylvania. What most compels you to write about your childhood home?

My childhood home.

When I was in seventh grade, my parents transplanted our family from a comfortable middle-class neighborhood of attached Tudor row-houses and Cape Cod bungalows in Queens to Manhasset, Fitzgerald's real life East Egg, a grand, imposing suburb on Long Island's North Shore. It was not a move without consequences. For in exchanging middle-management for elite professionals, lawn mowers for landscapers, enough for never enough, I developed at twelve years old a belligerent double vision. I refused to change schools (for the remaining year of grade school and all of high school), not willing to lose friends I had for friends I did not yet have. Yet my family's new address also conferred, and confirmed my outsider status for the next five years: while I would not be a snob from the North Shore, I could never

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again be the kid from Queens.

Long Island is a place that seems to magnify this double-vision. Imagine you're looking at a map of Long Island, one that shows Manhattan in its correct diminutive proportion: the small satellite squashed between the two hundred mile long finger of land jutting into the Atlantic (Long Island) and the great reef of continent spreading west to the Pacific. Now trace a finger along the Long Island Expressway, a long line dividing the North and South Shores, a road in existence (though a rough one at that) since 1810. Take heed. Year-round this route is clogged with commuters returning home from the city; in summer it is at a stand still since the far end of the South Shore is one long coast of expensive beach-front property. Exit early, at Huntington, where small octagonal signs point to the Walt Whitman Historical House and Museum. Do not mistake this with the Walt Whitman Shopping Mall nearby, an industrial, gray-walled behemoth with a car-glutted parking lot. Whitman—Long Island's Poet Laureate Emeritus, and more recently the Titular King of Cinnabun, Gap, and Victoria's Secret.

The other Long Island writer? F. Scott Fitzgerald. All stories of Long Island, it seems, gravitate towards or backwards to *The Great Gatsby*, with the confluence of desire and money, desire and not enough money, desire lost in money. So this collection of stories is for me a way to interrogate Long Island's promise (the promise of all suburbs perhaps) of "enough," and its failure, the "never enough."

You've related that some lies are necessary to sustain intimacy and love. This is an ironic (if not pragmatic) view of relationships. Other than the "Honey, of course those pants don't make you look fat," what other necessary lies do you think people tell loved ones?

The characters in my stories are never quite comfortable inside the lives they have taken on and so these stories reflect the struggle between their longing to be part of the happy, happy few, but also their acute awareness that such happiness comes at a cost, often demanding uneasy compromise, the lies that make their lives, in the most desperate of moments, bearable. I'm not sure it's the lies we tell others that are necessary; rather it's the lies we tell ourselves. For instance, Mike at the end of "Necessary Lies" knows that it will be impossible to be the kind of father he wishes to be—to be able to keep his daughter safe, to be the father in whom his daughter will confide everything.

But even while he knows this, he must lie to himself, must believe that he can aspire to be that kind of father. Or Gina, at the end of "Vigil," who has the foresight to see her sister's eventual fall, who finds such knowledge unbearable, but who must still believe that things can turn around. She has to believe this in order to continue her vigil.

How do you balance being a writer, professor, wife, mother, pet owner, and agricultural co-op organizer? When you find time to read, which writers earn that space of your time? How have your literary tastes changed in the last ten years?

Balance? I think imbalance is the operative condition of my life. Sheer force of will? Perhaps this, too. I think as a mother to two young children, it is often difficult, if not impossible to find time to write. That is, to find those large, unbroken stretches of time. Though perhaps this is my revisionist history of my pre-motherhood days. Ahh, the glorious past.

The novelist Reginald McKnight told me that all writers are exempt from writing until their children turn three. And in part, he's right. I find it incredibly difficult to sustain writing across time. I snatch at minutes, a few hours here and there. And I could get incredibly anxious about it (you know, the mantra drilled into every writer's head: you're not a writer if you're not writing and you'd better be writing until the wee hours of the morning fueled on caffeine or scotch or you're not a writer, not a writer, not a writer ad infinitum). The writing will still be there. That's what Frederick Busch, my teacher and friend, was always reminding me. If

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you are truly a writer, then it's in you. Even if you don't have pen to the page (or fingers to the keyboard), you're always thinking about stories, about the music of language; you're always listening to those voices in your head that are trying to tell you their stories, imploring you to write them down. So in those moments (or months) when I'm not writing, and instead am consumed by Alexander, my four month old who is still nursing for what feels like twenty-three hours of the day, or spending time with Sophia, my three and a half year old, marveling at her accurate and appropriate command of expletives, at her never ending chatter that begins at seven in the morning and ends at eight at night, I could feel incredibly anxious about not writing, and of course, I do, but I take deep breaths and remind myself that language, story, will always be

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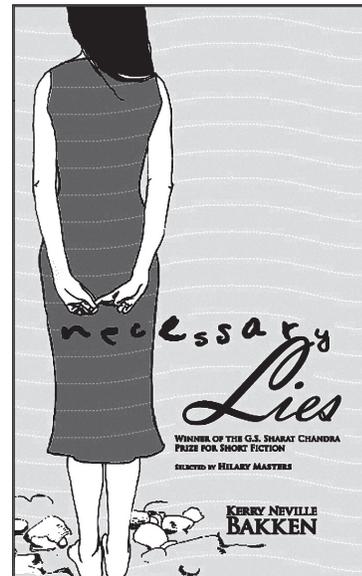
there for me. I have a very messy notebook right now with bits and pieces of stories, lines, characters, plot lines that are very insistent in their clamoring for my attention. So it is always still there even when I am not right there.

Writers I'm reading? I'm always behind. I'm on maternity leave right now, which I thought, naively, would free up hours upon hours of time. With Sophia, I went back to teaching after six weeks and spent the free time that I did have preparing for classes and grading papers, reading student work, advising students. Since I opted to take a full three month leave with Alexander, I thought, Ahhh, this time will be different. I imagined myself peacefully curled up in the rocking chair, Alexander contentedly nursing at the breast, and nothing else to do but get through my stack of thirty books. Naivete or wishful (delusional) thinking? But I am getting some reading done and find myself drawn to British writers these days. I'm not sure why—perhaps it's the unfamiliar use of a familiar language? I've just finished Alan Hollinghurst's *Line of Beauty*, Colm Toibin's *The Master*, Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* and *City of the Mind*, and have just started John Banville's *The Sea*. I've also spent last year reading all of Shirley Hazzard's novels, and just finished Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*. And every year, without fail, I work my way back through Jane Austen—her ear for dialogue, her economy of language, her sharp wit, the ease with which she composes an entire world, all of it astonishes me.

Now that you're in the process of publishing your first book, what goals and aspirations do you have for yourself as a writer? What more would you like to contribute to the world of letters?

This feels far too grand a question. I'm not sure what else I have to offer yet besides my book of stories. What I can offer is something I learned about writing, about being a writer from my teacher Frederick Busch, who recently and unexpectedly died. I remember Fred telling me, way back when I was an undergraduate at Colgate University, how difficult it was to be a writer. Not for the usual reasons of poverty, penury, and the poor-house. But because even when you were "good," even after you "made it," writing could only always and again promise heartache, rejection, and humiliation; that the urgent press of your own writing, if you were a writer, would always demand more and better and you would always fail. But every now and then, you might write a line, a scene, a character who would make it all worth it. That it was to that one-in-a-million chance of the right line or scene or character that you promised yourself to. And if you are a writer, then you owe it to yourself to follow the story and the words that won't let go. And not to listen, not to follow through, not to give your all to your work was, in the least, a failure of character, if not of spirit. And I

mean spirit in the capital S way—in the way Fred taught me to think about writing: that there is something holy and good in writing a story that matters, and not to strive for that is ignoble, miserly, a damn, damn shame.



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