INTERVIEW

The Absent Interview: An Interview with Rosalind Palermo Stevenson

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There, I hear Lucie say, as she hands the finished portrait to the woman—you are fixed, the sun has captured you. It's extraordinary. Don't you think it's extraordinary? Your image has been fixed on this print by the power of light.

…the flocks of water birds have all come back in the midst of their migrations. the goldenrod not yet in bloom, growing along the stagnant ponds that are hidden away in the remote stretches of land north above the docks. stretches of land with stalks of goldenrod grown tall. the dried-out

SD: Your writing is steeped in the historical although not as a chronicle of events, but as an era embedded in the voice, texture, and your characters. Reading your work is marvelous as if time travel is possible. We enter into a metaphysical and revelatory journey wherein you inhabit your characters and their time. Talk about your interest in these periods? Does it begin with an epoch you find fascinating or a character or a combination? Later I'd like to ask how the magic happens, i.e. the transcendence of the 21st century.

RPS: Your question makes me think of Ariadne and her thread which enabled Theseus to find his way out of the Minotaur's Labyrinth. I don't begin with a direct interest in the specific time period in which the work is set (though of course I become obsessively interested once I find myself in it). My interest in whatever piece I'm writing usually begins with something thin and elusive and that becomes a kind of thread that I follow 'into' rather than out of the labyrinth of subject and time period. Raw materials present themselves that fascinate and excite me and I write out of that fascination and excitement. For *The Absent* there was an exhibit called "Spirit Capture" at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, and an article about a boy abducted on a hunting trip with his father along the lower red river, and there was my interest in the spiritual activity and séances in the 1800s, and these became the impetus that led me into 19th century America's east and west. With *Insect Dreams* I happened to be in the gift shop of the Pierpont Morgan Library and was struck by a print there that had an intricate and archaic design of insects and flowers. It was painted in 1699 by the entomologist/artist Maria Sibylla Merian and I was struck by the fact that a woman had painted this incredible science-art at that time and that it had not been buried in obscurity. I began to do research about her and was led into 17th Century Suriname and the Netherlands.

In 19th Century America we still had slavery though we were finally bringing an end to it. We were also deep in the bowels of westward expansion and the destruction of the Native American people and their culture. We were engaging mediums to call up the dead in our parlors, discovering and working with the early forms

stalks from last year's blooms.

of photography, beginning to think about and become active on behalf of the rights of women, and seeing for the first time the canyons and deserts and mountains of the American west. In 17th Century Surinam the country had just become a colony of the Netherlands and renamed Suriname. Its plantations relied entirely on slaves brought from West Africa and the country's indigenous people were also subjugated. All this was taking place inside the gorgeous lushness of this part of the earth's natural environment, an environment of exotic plants, birds, insects, animals.

What is the face that life shows? My wife's face is of course perfect, always in my view, always near me, her proximity altering me with the weight of its intimacy, with the mingling of our breathing each night as we sleep.

…But what of that other face? The face of God sitting among all of life's faces.

As you point out, my writing is not a chronicle of events. I don't consider *The Absent* or *Insect Dreams* to be historical fiction in the strict sense of that genre. Both books are inventions, works of the imagination, poetic rather than historical renderings, and I regard them, in the most metaphysical sense of the word *present*, as existing in a continual present. It is the past and yet I believe the boundaries are to some extent illusory. The past can be entered. I try to see through the eyes of the time I'm working in. I try to be accurate and to create a sense of place that evokes the atmosphere of the period, but it is not a history lesson. I want the details of the time period to serve as a backdrop, to function as the natural manifestation of what the characters would see, taste, smell, observe, encounter, wrestle with, and sometimes be exalted by and/or defeated by.

It is said that to understand the past is to understand the present. Perhaps that is partly what I mean by a continuous present. Their lives then. Our lives now. On a continuous line. I remember how deeply poignant it felt reading 19th century diaries of ordinary people at the Philadelphia Historical Society when I was doing research for *The Absent.* Simple statements in these diaries: "*Kind friends called to see me and I passed the evening with my much loved neighbors."* These diaries are fragile, precious relics. And they are treated as fragile and precious by the Historical Society. You have to check your bag. No pens can be taken into the room, only pencils can be used to take notes. The diaries are brought to you on velvet lined platforms and must remain on them. These relics tell us something about our common humanity. These records of simple ordinary lives function as one of the many vehicles from the past that carry our common humanity into the present.

SD: *In thinking about your themes and subject matter I'm struck by the word metamorphosis and wondering how notions of alteration and transformation inform your work. You've chosen towering figures to write about. In* Insect Dreams, *Maria Sibylla, (1647-1717) the German-born naturalist and botanical illustrator, journeys to South America to study and catalogue insect and plant life. In her caterpillar engravings she*

[Handprints – the way objects reverberate with the presence of those who have touched them.]

depicts the metamorphosis of moths and butterflies. Then in Kafka at Rudolf Steiner's *you speak brilliantly in the voice of Franz Kafka whose most famous short story is "The Metamorphosis." It even strikes me that your portrayal of Mussolini in "*The Guest" *tackles the theme of metamorphosis. Here we are talking about not only the alteration of one man but that of an entire population. Conversion. Mutation. Can you talk about this?*

I have returned to the West, where they're telling a story, where they're passing the talking stick, using the talking stick each in turn, their hands clasped firmly around the neck of the stick. HA! the storyteller begins. HA! The way things come into the world. That which is coming. The wren said to the man, "Do not be afraid. Climb on my back and shut your eyes." Before dawn he flew away from the village. With everyone listening, HA! the storyteller begins.

RPS: I love this observation. I haven't thought specifically about alteration and transformation when selecting the subjects of my work. On the other hand, I've given a lot of thought to the idea of mutation with regard to the form, the style I write in. Lately I've begun to think about what I'm doing as being a kind of prose mutation – a mutation of the way language is used and displayed against space. Not form for form's sake, but -necessary for a true expression of the content. I wasn't thinking consciously of metamorphosis, transformation, alteration, and mutation being underlying subjects in all my work, but you are right, they seem always to be there. I wonder if you sometimes have the same experience – that is of only realizing certain aspects of what you are doing in your work when it is observed and commented on by someone else.

My interest in the subjects of transformation and mutation is more or less placed in the context of cosmology. I'm thinking of Taoist and Buddhist ideas of a universe which embodies constant transformation. And we, as part of that universe, are constantly being transformed, moving toward a kind of distillation of our true selves. Life is transformation. There's the natural transformation process from birth to death. And everything in between. Looking at a photo of oneself as a child we can see the way we have been transformed from then to now. I have been working with these ideas in my writing, but not necessarily starting out with them as my subjects. I think it is more that they find their way into the work as part of the thematic material being explored. The idea of transformation eventually becoming a mutation, or the idea of mutation simply spontaneously occurring. These are ideas which I find exciting. When I think of them in terms of the potential for the future of writing I think of this quote from one of the Sabian Symbols that a clairvoyant saw in a vision in 1925: "A child is seen being born out of an egg. Keynote: The emergence of new mutations according to the great rhythm of the Cosmos."

…it's all little boats of idle dreams for those who come in to look. The men and

SD: Can you talk about your own journey to writing. Were you an early reader? How did you discover the written word was going to be your destiny? Were your parents literary?

women and the little children too (though the children are not allowed to pay the extra quarter). But those who pay stare at me until they've had their fill. Maybe I'll go with Calvin Bird to Syracuse and ask the surgeon there to cut away my extra sex. Which one shall be cut do you think? Which would you have me remain, Sir? A man or a woman? Does it seem a kind of murder? The sharp knife of the surgeon to remove all trace.

RPS: One of my early memories is that of being desperate to read at about two or three years old – wanting to read for myself the books my mother read to me. I wanted to read any words I saw: newspapers, signage, etc. So you might say I was passionately drawn to the written word. I was an early reader. And then later I loved the grammar class in grade school – diagramming those sentences: subject, predicate, object. The rules of the game.

My mother wasn't a big reader when I was young although she was the one who did all the early reading to me. My father was the serious reader, which included literature, but mostly before I was born. Later he was too busy making a living for me and my mother. He loved literature, but I don't think that writing was his wish for me. He was second generation Italian, the oldest of ten children, very poor family. Yet he was a man of refinement and intellect and loved the arts. He was a very gentle man and he loved me. He wanted me to have security in life, therefore to pursue something materialistically sound. But I was not interested in what was materialistically sound. I am a dreamer. I was interested in what could be imagined, in going where my imagination took me. I am an only child and had much time alone. I spent a great deal of that time engaged in the inventions of my solitary play. I created worlds in that play. And soon, as I became old enough to really read, to read the books one reads in childhood, I realized that worlds could be created with language. Hildegard of Bingen the German Benedictine abbess, writer, composer, philosopher, mystic, visionary, and polymath (1098 – 1179) said: "The Angels, who are spirits, cannot speak in a comprehensible language. Language is therefore a particular mission for humanity." Of course I did not know that quote at the time, but from a very early age I felt that working with language was my particular mission.

If we think of a human soul we might think of a figure dancing all covered with earth-plot and bark, and with rope-hemp and fur, and a face like a mask, the eyes hollow and slanted, the hands raised like claws. And we

I started writing a novel around thirteen years old. I was showing chapters as I wrote them to my friends at school and they were eager for the next chapter. So that was a kind of encouragement. But I had a lot of self-consciousness about it. It took me a long time before I could freely express my interior world, that is to say write from my own inwardness.

The need to write has always had that life or death quality to it for me. I was and continue to be driven by a reverence for the power of language. Language in the sense of its power to evoke, and even to transform. Dane Rudhyar says: "Images, even more than ideas, rule

might imagine that the dance is taking place on the top of the mesa, or on one of the four sacred mountains. The sky heavy with clouds. The clanging of bells. The beating of drums.

the world; for, in order to achieve convincing power, a transformative idea has to become clothed in an imagery able to evoke in human beings the near-possibility of new and inspiring developments." This is something I believe is relevant to writing. Lately I have been thinking about the mission of language in relation to human evolution. And the idea that working with language is perhaps a role one might be destined to play or to reflect in that evolution.

SD: Your prose is powerfully and lyrically rooted in sense of place, yet that place is various and might even be metaphysical i.e. in the ether. On the physical plane you've given us Surinam and Italy and Austria and Waco, Texas at the Branch Davidian Compound. Where were you raised and how has that sense of place impacted your body of work? You are one of those writers who as Jean Rhys says— all the hallmarks are rubbed off.

Empty of life and yet filled with the presence of life—the reverberation of those who once came and went their way. Stone. Clay. The archways of the living-compound. One can see through the archways from one room to the next. Each leads to another and to others. There are sometimes carvings on the walls. A strange shelf like a mantel still intact over one of the archways. Behind the houses of the ruins only rock. No one can enter from behind.

Thank you for this question and your reflections on the sense of place in my work. I grew up in upstate New York – Syracuse. There were three major locations within Syracuse which provided the landscape of my formative years. First there was the part of the city where the first generation immigrants like my Italian grandparents lived. Then from the time I was four until eight years old my father moved my mother and me to the outskirts of the city to what was a farm house with a barn, a chicken coop, and eighteen acres of land filled with trees. It was a romantic notion because he did not really intend to farm. A few years later, at my mother's insistence, we moved away from that rural setting and to the suburbs not far from my grandparents.

I would say that the period of time we lived in that enormous farm house in the rural setting had a great impact on my sense of place and the way it is used in my work. I was an only child as I mentioned and I spent many hours alone roaming through those eighteen acres. I walked with my dog along the somewhat deserted highway on my way to school, climbed trees, covered myself in leaves. Nature entered me. Once a garter snake wrapped itself around my wrist. The skies were usually gray and had the sense of foreboding. Those few years played a huge role in the formation of my psychological history. I believe they sensitized me to the idea of my surroundings, to where one is at any given time - what things look like, smell like, feel like, the atmosphere of a place, the subtle shifts in the way air feels from one place to another. Playing alone in nature with all its power stimulated my imagination and I think

that later it enabled me to imagine myself into almost any place and to be able to write about places I have never been.

I love your Jean Rhys quote. I would say that the hallmarks of Syracuse, my family, the entire milieu of my growing up were rubbing themselves off of me even as they appeared from year to year. Yet certain aspects played a deeply formative role. The details were powerful: the way people talked, looked, the feeling of being part of a clan, the power of blood relationship, the food, all that comprised my early experience of humanity. And while I don't write from an autobiographical base, I think the force of those details have been transformed in my writing into the details appropriate to the subject of each particular work. Also the mysticism embedded in my Catholic upbringing has been transformed into a sense of the mysterious, the metaphysical.

A painting of Saint Theresa of Jesus hangs over the altar. She is shown as young. Her hands are clasped. Her eyes dominate the portrait. The background is dark, as is her robe; the darkness is broken by a white cape worn across her shoulders. And by the white flesh of her face and her hands. One bare foot is exposed at the base of her robe.

SD: Tell us about your research methods.. Your narrator is a photographer in the early days of the art. How did you prepare yourself for assuming that point-of-view?

There was almost no aspect of *The Absent* that did not require extensive research. The writer Marguerite Yourcenar uses the word scholarship in referring to the research effort for her *Memoirs of Hadrian.* I think that word is apt because it always does feel like a kind of scholarly effort when I'm doing research for a book. *The Absent's* demand in that regard was much greater than anything I had done previously, including *Insect Dreams*, which had required a significant research effort. For *The Absent* I traveled, making many trips to Philadelphia and also some to the west, and I used libraries, bookstores, the internet, museums, historical societies, interviews in person and by telephone, and other kinds of odd and unexpected resources.

When I saw your aunt today I mentioned Elsa's baby and she said that each soul is an old one returned—that it is not many souls and many lives, but one single,

The research or 'scholarship' effort is something that I do throughout the writing of a piece and I find that there is a symbiotic relationship between the writing and the research. I approach it in various ways. Often I will have an idea, or be lead to a certain subject, place, type of detail, etc, and then I will start to immerse myself in it and learn much more about it, come to know it intimately in order to bring it into the writing. In the process I generally make other discoveries that seem to belong to the piece I am writing and that inspire the flow of the language. And so then I have to go after the details of those discoveries. It goes on that way, back and forth, or with a kind of simultaneity of writing and research. The scholarship involved in this kind of research is not

indivisible life seeking its own perfection. I told your aunt I was not certain I understood; it seemed a lofty thought; and if it is true, then who are we really?

simply in the interest of 'grounding the work in fact.' It is that of course. But I think more importantly it is what enables me to 'imagine' myself into the place, the time, the characters and situations.

In making my narrator William a photographer I was primarily following my excitement and my fascination with the medium and the subject of early photography. I've always had a strong interest in photography and in cinema as well. During my early years in New York City I made films in sixteen millimeter, black and white. I now have my films housed at the Anthology Film Archives. Photography has always been in my life. For a while when I was very young my father had his own photography studio. It was a short-lived profession for him, but he maintained a strong interest in photography and was always taking pictures of the family and of nature. In some ways the character of William is an homage to my father. William is also an homage to all the photographers of that time who went out with their equipment as I describe it in the book and photographed the American west. The great photographer Timothy O'Sullivan was one of my main models for the character of William. And in a sense the book is an homage to photography itself. To the mystery of the photographic image. The way it captures time, the way it captures a face with its expression frozen in time, a person frozen at the age she or he was then, the reflection of a mood at a given moment, the way it shows us the subtle differences in the human image over the years, the way the dead are given back to us, the way we can hold our dead in their image, the way the dead look back at us from the past, the way we look back at ourselves from the past, the way we can see the self that was us as an infant, or at two, or thirteen, or twenty years of age. As an homage to photography the character Lucie Martin is just as important as William. The book describes the artistry and intimacy of her photographic vision of the portraits she takes, whereas William's vision is of the natural world which gives us place and places we might never see if not for the photograph. I think the answer to your question how did I prepare myself for assuming the point-of-view of a photographer of those early days of the art might be that it was simply by connecting to what I have always regarded as the deep mysteriousness of the photographic image, and by connecting to all that I have always loved about photography.

spit the blood from your mouth

I will take it from you

memory settles it