

from Juked #6, Spring 2009

LINDSAY MARIANNA WALKER

AN INTERVIEW WITH COURTNEY ELDRIDGE

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Really, any voice of distinction."*

Courtney Eldridge is the author of *Unkempt*, a collection of short stories and a novella. Her work has appeared in numerous literary publications, including *McSweeney's*, *Post Road*, *Bomb*, *The Chattahoochee Review* and *The Mississippi Review*. In 2006, she received a fellowship from the Edward F. Albee Foundation, as well as a residency from the Ucross Foundation, and she was awarded a French literary prize, the Prix du Marais, for the translation of her novella, "The Former World Record Holder Settles Down."

In the fall of 2008 I had the good fortune not only to meet Courtney, but to participate in her first writing workshop ever. Frank, funny, genuine, and honest, she left a big impression on all of us at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Dave Eggers says she is "one of the smartest young writers in America, and she knows how to use knives." Rick Moody calls her "one of my favorite living short story writers." After reading *Unkempt* it's easy to understand such praise. Inspired by her visit, and to mark the release of her second book, *The Generosity of Women*, which will be published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in June 2009, I conducted the following interview with Courtney via e-mail. (She currently resides in Buenos Aires, Argentina and that type of phone call tends to get pricey).

LW: Rick Moody, Amy Hempel, Dave Eggers, Frederick Barthelme – none of these writers have been shy about expressing their admiration for your writing. How, and to what extent, have they influenced you? Who else do you credit?

CE: One of the things those people have taught me is the value of—forgive me if this sounds in any way self-referential—generosity of spirit with other writers. I was pretty snotty in my opinions when I first began writing, and I can be to this day, but when someone is classy enough to offer their help, to read your work and give you their honest response, when they have nothing to gain . . . Until you’ve put your work out into the world, until you’ve taken some hits from critics and readers, alike, who really loathe your work, you don’t have to reel in your own nastiness that much. So in that way, I wish everyone had the opportunity to be published. On a personal level, the support those people have given me is largely why I find ways to keep going another day, another week, another month, any of the hundreds of times that I’ve wanted to quit writing altogether, and get something like a “real job.” If you think you’ll reach a point that, by virtue of having a couple books under your belt, you won’t have to keep scraping by, struggling, collecting rejection slips, even after ten years, I have news for you.

Beyond the people you’ve mentioned, there are so many unsung heroes in the literary world—just about every single editor who’s ever published my work at a little magazine or literary quarterly has given it incredible time and attention. They do that for little to no pay, and precious little to no thanks, certainly. They do it because they love it, and that never fails to put my own pettiness and setbacks and false expectations in perspective.

LW: On the back cover of *Unkempt*, your short story collection, there is a tongue-in-cheek bio listing the various schools from

which you dropped out. In a market saturated with creative writing graduates, what perspective can you share having never had a workshop?

CE: I think, because I didn't attend a writing program and never took a class, I had a chip on my shoulder in that I kept telling myself there was a right path and a wrong path, and that all these people with creative writing degrees knew secrets of the trade that I would never know. Today, I don't know a single successful writer who is successful because of where they went to school. The successful writers are the ones who do the work every day and don't make excuses.

The only thing that really matters is that you're spending every possible hour you can, writing. Other than that, it doesn't matter if you went to school or where you went to school—unless writing programs and workshops help you carve out the most writing time for yourself. It's completely unromantic, I know, but the sooner you get down to the work of being a writer— which is writing every day, nothing more—the better your chances for getting your writing published.

In the meantime, I'd recommend saving a nice shoebox, maybe even a boot box, and labeling it, MY BIG FAT REJECTION BOX, and then dedicating yourself to the task of filling it. Because rejection slips are a rite of passage, and the truth is that you will continue to receive rejections for the rest of your career, no matter how many books you publish. That's the reality. So I'd recommend sending your stories to anyone who will read them, because the real trick is getting your work into the right hands, finding the right reader for your writing, and the right reader is the one who sends you a note, asking if they can publish your work.

That said, the single best piece of advice I was ever given was this: Ask yourself if there's anything, absolutely anything else in this world you can do besides writing, and if you can, do it. In other

words, if you can quit writing, quit. But if you really can't quit, you better settle down, because a writer's life is not an easy one. The truth is that I tried to quit many times over the years, and I'm still struggling with that now.

LW: Who are the writers you would recommend for someone learning the craft? Which books do you think every aspiring writer should read?

CE: Of course many come to mind, but at this point in time, I'm wary of singling out individual writers and books. The thing is, it doesn't matter which writer influences you, but rather, what you do with the education their work affords your own writing. Looking back, I think that I, personally, spent an inordinate amount of time trying to emulate certain stylistic elements of my favorite writers rather than asking myself basic questions like, What are they doing that I love and how do I take a page out of their book and run with it? That is, how do I take this particular element and make it my own? Really, I don't care if it's Austen or Auster, whatever that element or device is that speaks to you, can you translate it into your own language, your own storytelling, or are you going to spend ten years trying to write in someone else's style?

LW: What role does writing play in your life?

CE: Curse and cure. Writing is an affliction. It's not sane. In fact, there's nothing sane about writing and/or the life you have to live to support the habit. But as of yet, there's nothing else I'd rather do more.

LW: What role does life play in your writing? To be more specific, your novel is set in New York but you wrote much of it

in other cities, states, countries – what effect does your environment have on your writing?

CE: I work best in confined spaces, small rooms with minimal stimulation or visual relief or any kind, except if I'm pinning up notes. A cement block with one cork wall and no Internet access would be ideal – honestly, I need the bare minimum of distraction or forget about getting any work done. Also, I prefer to write early, shortly after I wake and pour a cup of coffee, which is less and less “early” these days, but still. I prefer to get in a few hours of writing, even if it's just rereading notes, before I allow myself to check email, read the paper, think about lunch or dinner. By now, I'm pretty disciplined, so I write every day, seven days a week. There have been days in the past two months that I've worked between fifteen to eighteen hours for a solid week or month, and there are days I've only worked four hours, total. But again, I show up to work every day, that's the main thing.

LW: Can you speak a little about your process?

CE: In terms of the creative process, I handwrite notes to begin, and continue throughout the entire process. Every purse, every room, every table, every jacket and coat I own has paper and pen. I walk a lot, every day if I can, and that's when I write. I go to the park and walk laps, and once in a while, I'll get a break and have to stop to take a note, because I've overheard a piece of conversation in some distant corner of my brain. So I collect and transcribe those notes as I go along, and if I'm lucky, the notes accumulate and pick up speed.

LW: Do you use any other props?

CE: I work with large-scale corkboards now. A friend urged me to try this software, Scribner? It's supposed to help writers, but it didn't help this writer at all. I simply have too many notes and require far more space to see a composition than a computer screen allows. At one point, during the novel's writing, I was in residency in Wyoming and had this amazing studio I still covet, but anyhow. I had something like an 18x18-foot wall covered in notes. I literally had to use a step stool in order to reach some of the notes—written in thick black magic marker on index cards. Usually just keywords, headlines, "Goddamnit, Jordan!" "You're evil, you know that?," whatever the key words were, and I'd know. Oh, right, that's such and such a scene and that has to be repeated here, here, here and there, and it should transition to this and this . . .

LW: What's the weirdest thing you've ever attempted to overcome writer's block?

CE: Well, there were several periods when I wanted to see an acupuncturist in the hopes that he or she could relieve my blocked Chi (because a writer's block is obviously a sign of blocked creative energy, right?). Unfortunately, owing to the fact that I was trying to become a writer, I never had money for anything, so I had to weigh these things: Chi or food, Chi or food? I chose food every time. I still think I might have a little blocked Chi, but it's much better since I realized a visit from the muse wasn't going to do my writing for me.

LW: What's the weirdest thing you've ever attempted?

CE: Well, moving to Argentina might prove one of them. We'll see what happens in the year ahead.

LW: What do you miss about New York?

CE: New York is in my blood. Then again, a lot of things have been in my blood that weren't necessarily healthy for me. Tragically, New York is no longer a place that has any room for struggling artists and writers—it's pushed those people out, altogether, and will pay for it—is paying for it. There's money in that city, but far less creativity and creative energy than ten, twenty years ago.

What I miss most about New York is walking every day, the life on the street, the voices you'd hear, taking a side street, dodging retail traffic. But I don't miss living in a closet. And I certainly don't miss working three part-time jobs six or seven days a week and not being able to pay my bills.

Buenos Aires has been very kind to me, has given me a quality of life I've never known. For the first time in my career, I'm now able to write full-time, and I can go out to dinner or to see a movie once a week. I don't live with the cancer of constant, nagging anxiety and poverty that was my lifeblood in New York. I think that's where much of the neuroses of the first book came from, simply trying to keep my head above water. In that sense, I'm very interested to see what the next year holds for my writing, what direction it takes. Beyond this next year, I have no idea where or what's next, which seems to be the rule, not the exception.

LW: Speaking of neuroses, Jeff Turrentine is quoted in the *NY Times* as saying (about *Unkempt*): "Neurosis is to Eldridge's stories what suburbia was to Cheever's: it's at once context, antagonist and metasubject. Her brilliant trick is to write in a voice so colloquially familiar that we don't automatically classify these crazy people as 'the other' but rather recognize them as our friends, our family members or even ourselves." In *Generosity* there are certainly some neuroses among the characters but what do you think of Turrentine's comment? Is neurosis

a “metasubject” you cultivate in any sort of conscious way? Rick Barthelme sent out an e-mail the other night which defined neurosis as “the inability to tolerate ambiguity.” Does this definition match your conception of the word, or would you define it differently?

CE: Oh, that Rick is such a card. But he never gets his quotes right, poor man. In fact, neurosis is defined as, “the ambiguity to tolerate inability.” Really, was that one of his famous 3 a.m. emails? I’d love to see it, if you can send it, by the way.

No, I don’t cultivate meta in any conscious way, but at the time I started the story collection, in the late 1990’s, meta was still very much in the air, so what can you do but breathe? And, although I was actually pretty leery of its overuse, of accomplishing little more than offering fourth- or sixth-string meta, at best, I still don’t think it’s wise to work too hard to avoid certain trends if it comes into play in a way that is genuine and true to the work you’re trying to do. Same with, say, irony. Irony was vilified for a few years, there, and it’s like suddenly everyone was crying out, Down with irony! Irony is tyranny! There are limits, certainly, but I think it’s a bigger mistake to consciously work to avoid a natural direction in storytelling, if it’s natural to you. Because the fact is that the literary world goes through its own fads and trends on par with *Glamour* Do’s and Don’ts, but anyhow. In general, I recommend keeping your underwear or lack thereof to yourself, but otherwise, don’t worry about fashion.

What I do relate to is the mention of colloquially familiar voices. Until I was about nine years old, we moved a great deal when I was growing up; I went to at least a dozen different schools, and we lived in several states in the west, and we had family in the Midwest and the East Coast, so I learned, early on, that how you dress was one clear indication if you were a new kid (nothing worse than being a new kid!), but also, how you spoke.

I think a strong voice is a force of nature that can stop anyone in their tracks—used to happen to me in NYC all the time. I always stop to listen to the rantings of homeless people; cab drivers shouting at cyclists, or vice versa; bridge-and-tunnel couples drunkenly brawling on the sidewalks of the LES, what have you. Really, any voice of distinction, I don't care what the story is: I just want to go along for the ride for a while, see where it takes me.

LW: Your friend, Amy Hempel, says that she begins every story already knowing the first and last line. Your stories and novel, apart from content, are so formally interesting (by that I mean interesting in terms of form—as opposed to intriguingly stuffy) I'm curious as to how you begin a story or novel? Are the processes different?

CE: *Is that right?* She begins every story already knowing the first and last line? Well, damn her. That woman gets the hair, the dogs, all the beginnings and endings? There is no justice in life or literature!

No, I never know the ending, and if I did, I'm sure I'd over think it and screw it up. I always begin with a voice. I scribble and doodle and wear sock puppets, talking to my hands, until I finally hear a voice speak up. It might be as little as a paragraph, or a sentence, even. You gotta start somewhere.

I've done enough writing now to trust that if the characters are honest, if I'm being honest to the character, if I'm telling a story honestly rather than simply trying to look good, personally, the ending will come of its own accord. And more often than not, it does. But still, damn her and her all-knowing short story beginnings and endings. Seriously, that's pretty humbling, huh? Thanks, Amy, never mind me and my all-unknowing story endings. Honestly, Amy is phenomenal. There are few people in publishing, few writers I've ever met who are as generous as she is.

LW: You consider yourself a short story writer first; can you talk about the experience of writing a novel? What were the surprising challenges? Surprising joys? Stumbling blocks?

CE: Naturally, it's a little more complicated than that. Originally – this would be ten, twelve years ago, when I first started trying to write fiction – I wanted to write novels for some reason. I don't know where I got the idea I should write a novel, really. But then, very early on, I seem to remember trying to write a novel about something that I'm sure I fantasized would set the literary world on *fire!*, and now, I cannot recall. Thank god for repressed memory.

Anyhow, when a novel proved too ambitious for my abilities, I decide to give the short story a go, at which point I started reading just about every collection and anthology of short stories I could find. Then, when I actually managed to finish a short story or two, I decided that was a more worthwhile way to spend my time than finishing unfinished novels. So yes, by virtue of completion, I became a short story writer first and foremost.

LW: I got the feeling, very early in *The Generosity of Women*, that I was experiencing a high wire act. The form of the story – a weaving of six voices, six characters, all told in first person – pulls you in immediately and the line never goes slack. When I first picked it up to read I'd planned to give it an hour – it took six before I could come up for air. I had a similar experience reading your short stories and I'm wondering if, and to what extent, you write with this effect in mind? Perhaps a better way to phrase it – how does the telling of a story affect the content and vice versa?

CE: Thank you, that's very kind of you to say.

Honestly, if any high wire aspect ever occurred to me, I'm sure I'd look down and fall, so I guess the answer is no. Although I am aware, at least in my own life, that asking someone to give you their time and attention doesn't allow for much time or attention in this day. So I do feel that writers need to respond to the realities of how little time people have these days, how many other forms of media are far easier to consume, to respect the fact that people are pressed for time, that time is a luxury for everyone. I mean, really, as a writer, you're competing with: film, television, video games, the Internet, pornography; you have to move it along, like it or not. If you don't like it, well, that's a choice you make.

LW: The bulk of the novel takes place over a very short time span – basically a weekend – and while the chronology isn't hard to follow, the scenes don't unfold in a straightforward way. The scene between Bobby and Joyce in the dog park – a conversation that is drawn out over the course of the book – is one example, and I'm curious as to how you paced it: Did you know from the beginning that the real time in which the novel occurs would be so brief?

CE: That's actually one of the few things I knew about the book early on, at least from the point of realizing I was dealing with six different characters, all female, all first-person narratives. Because that fact alone was so overwhelming I decided, very consciously, to create a narrow time constraint on the novel's main events as a means of preserving my sanity, if nothing else. In any case, all I knew when I began was that I wanted to take a chance with the book's structure. Because structural risks are something I always look for in storytelling, and because I believe a book can be both structurally innovative and emotional resonant, that there is no need to compromise one for the other. Bottom line is that I don't think in a straightforward, linear, plot-driven way, so traditional

story structure is never going to work for me. I have to figure ways that do work for me, that are natural to the way I think and write, and this way worked. It wasn't preconceived; it happened step by step, and I built the story piece by piece, really.

LW: Did you plan each of the main characters beforehand? Were there any surprises that popped up along the way?

CE: I knew that it would be a book about women and that there would be more than four characters from the start. Originally, I thought there would be three main characters and three supporting characters—seemed balanced, at least. Well, given six women, maybe it shouldn't have come as a surprise that none of them wanted to play a supporting role, but it was still a surprise. I tried to stick to the plan for a month or two, which was principled, maybe, but I got no cooperation, whatsoever. So, since I had to weave six separate voices into one narrative thread, I had no choice but to make some adjustments in the blueprints. Take the character Joyce Kessler, for example. I thought she'd be a "buddy" to the character Bobbie—every gynecologist needs some comedic relief, right? But then, the more I got to know Joyce, the more she had to say for herself, the more she told me. Namely, "Fuck off. In fact, why don't you take your buddy idea and fuck off, the both of you?" So I went with it.

LW: Visual arts, and artists, play a big role in this novel—Joyce owns a gallery, Greg's an artist—are these characters (or characteristics) derived from real life?

CE: I think it had more to do with timing, really, in terms of what's been happening in the art market, the ever-expanding art bubble of the past decade, watching the art world take over Chelsea and spread to other neighborhoods of New York City, like

the Lower East Side, Dumbo, Williamsburg. And then, of course, watching the money follow. High art is such big business, and for the past ten years, there's been one article or another in the papers just about every week, either a story about that week's biennial, or a record-breaking auction price, or some new hot gallery, or this year's hot crop of visual artists, fresh out of grad school. So it had more to do with that reality and time period than any particular artist or gallerist.

LW: In the Acknowledgments you credit the artist Robert Szot and his painting exhibit from which the title of the novel (presumably) comes. Was there something about that painting, or exhibit, or artist that inspired you? Were there other titles you considered?

CE: I've never actually met Robert Szot, and I have only seen a handful of his paintings. Szot was a friend of an ex-boyfriend of mine, who was storing some of Rob's paintings for him. This was in December 2004, I think, and my ex- had a warehouse space in Brooklyn at the time, and after looking at a few of his paintings, which were maybe five foot by five foot canvases, I asked about the artist, and that's when my ex- told me the title of Szot's exhibit was "The Generosity of Women." Which was just so . . . so you-cheeky-little-art-boy-you, but at the same time, I was humored. I couldn't help laughing, really. And over the course of the next year or two, that title kept coming back to me. That was how the book began about a year later, with a title that I wanted to turn inside out.

LW: Slightly off-topic, but how did you choose the cover art?

CE: Ah, yes, book covers. But one of many things they don't tell you until they tell you: writers don't choose their artwork; cover

art is chosen for writers. I don't know if it's true or not, but I heard that Bill Clinton had a say in his cover design, which is great, if you're Bill Clinton. But for the rest of us, you take what they give you. Also, for what it's worth, this is the stage in the game when you begin to hear things like, "Marketing loves it." Which is another way of saying, "Done deal."

LW: Are you pleased with how it turned out?

CE: In this case I have to say that I was greatly relieved. Ugh, you have no idea how worried I was about what I'd be handed. Because, think about it: the cover design for a novel about six women could have gone so haywire—an illustrated stiletto heel, a bowl of cherries, a bit of pink frosting and colored sprinkles on the side of a woman's painted red lips—you know what I mean, scantily-posed fruit or lingerie, who knows what—I shudder to think. In a glass half-empty or half-full sense, here's the rule: don't waste your time imagining how good the cover design could be, imagine how bad it might have been, and count your blessings.

LW: What role does research play in your writing? Do you avoid it, get absorbed in it?

CE: Now that I think about it, I don't know what part of writing your first novel, or any novel, isn't research. The entire process of writing a book, from the first word to the last, from everything that you write to everything you learn about getting a book published in this day in age, how labor-intensive the entire process actually is, is research, absolutely. So yes, I get very involved in the research process.

Because of how I had to live to get by in New York, and just how little writing I was getting done in the course of a year, trying to make ends meet, for the past few years, I had no choice but to leave

the city and spend a few months of each year in solitary confinement, whether at an artist colony or borrowing a friend's house, upstate. Because those stints might be the only time I'd really have to write all year, during those periods, all I did was write: I wouldn't check email; I wouldn't read papers; I was not in touch with friends and family: I would check out, basically. I am very fortunate that the people in my life give me that space, but even so, it's not easy to get into the sort of marathon mind frame, and it's not easy to come out of it, either.

Regardless, if you mean research in the formal sense of the word, like learning about the rings of Saturn or what the temperature was in NYC on a given day in 2006, well, that's easy. Actually, for me, that type of work is always a nice break from more creative demands—where Google serves no purpose. I love a well-researched book, but for me, that simply means writing that convinces you that the author knows the story, inside and out, that the author knows the characters intimately, and that the author gives every reason to trust he or she is going to take you somewhere you've never been, no matter what the route.

LW: Favorite character?

CE: Joyce was the easiest. Joyce was the most fun. Which, I admit, is probably because Joyce is the most profane. I mean, keep in mind that one of my favorite female literary characters is the Wife of Bath. It's a stretch, not to mention ridiculous self-flattery, but still, I'd like to think Joyce Kessler is of the bawdy female literary lineage of the Wife of Bath—without the spousal abuse and much sexier footwear, of course.

LW: What was the experience of editing the novel like?

CE: This book taught me to edit in a way my stories didn't, because there were literally hundreds of loose ends that needed resolution, at least in the short term. So I had to keep asking myself the basic questions: Does this feel like a natural ending to the thought/emotion? Is it strong? Does it create the necessary segue for the next narrator? Does this piece of the puzzle fit somewhere else? If so, move it or cut it.

The other half the story is that in the daily tumult of publishing, the editor who acquired my first novel was no longer with my publisher, Harcourt, by the time I finished this novel. So I was incredibly fortunate when my book landed in the lap of one of that dying breed of editors who still work with text, who actually loves working with text, and most of all, who know how to help a writer really shape the story they're trying to tell. Adrienne Brodeur read the book five or six times, easily, and gave me incredible line edits each and every time, while also setting very firm expectations of a total page count, and she never wavered, no matter how many times I whined, "Oh, but I love that scene, I can't lose that scene!" To which she would say, "You're right, it's a great scene, I agree. So what would you rather cut, instead?"

Listen up, young writers, nine times out of ten, you really can lose that scene you love, and frankly, no one but you will be crying for its return, trust me. Come on, how many times do you read a short story or novel and think to yourself, Wow, why do I have this awful suspicion that this writer was forced to cut the most brilliant scene for no good reason? Really, if your scene is that one in ten, if it truly is as wonderful as you think it is, well, you'll figure how to put it to use one day. So buck up and cut it, already. That's what I learned from this book. And that's what a good editor teaches you without ever making you feel like too big a whiner or prima donna.

As something of an aside, let me just say that I don't think many people realize how long it takes to get a book published, that from the point a writer hands over a finished manuscript, even if it's in

near-perfect condition, the schedule of most American publishers could easily have a window of 12-18 months before that book will hit the shelf. The entire editing process, though, took about eighteen months, and a full year after I began working with an editor. The original draft was 635 pages, I believe, and that was cut to 535 in four months' time, and that was then cut two more times, taking 50 pages out of each draft over the course of another six or seven months. So I had time to focus on polishing every voice, every transition, and the overall pacing, making sure one cut or segue made sense. I tried my best, at least.

LW: How did you know when the novel was done?

CE: For me, a story or book is finished when the editor or head of production cuts me off, and I'm not allowed to make any more changes to the manuscript. Even then, I'm not sure a story is ever really done; it's just gone to print, so again, my work becomes making peace with that fact.

LW: You began as a short story writer; now that you've published a novel, is there one form you prefer over the other?

CE: Yes, my attitudes have definitely changed. When my story collection sold, I got a two-book book deal, because that's how a publisher is most likely to stand a chance of seeing a dime in return for their investment. They agree to publish your short stories in exchange for a novel – and of course, when asked, I said that I had a novel in the works, which, of course, was a complete lie.

So you see, the two-book book deal is a mixed blessing, because on one hand, I thought, *Excellent, now I know I have a publisher for my second book.* On the other hand, I'd never written a novel and I'd never written on demand, so the fear of failure was greater than I'd

ever known. I can't tell you how many days I had to ask myself, *Why did I do this? Why would anyone ever do this to themselves? What am I doing? How do I do this?*

Well, having no idea what I was doing, feeling obligated to deliver something, I started a novel, and finished a novel, sort of, but it didn't work. For more reasons that I care to enumerate: it just didn't work. So, a good year past the novel's delivery date specified in my contract, I tried again. I started from scratch, knowing I'd be two years behind deadline, at best. Scary.

Now, three years later, I'm torn: because I prefer the novel to short stories in that you spend so much more time with characters, figuring out how they work, how they think. But again, the short story is where I can take chances now and then.

I do feel that the short story is the best place to learn craft (and yes, I do cringe writing the word, *craft*: it's so *Actor's Studio*, no?). By craft, I mean how an individual writer tells their own story, as opposed to how they think a story should be told; craft is the process of undoing your own preconceptions, largely.

What's more, the short form is the perfect place to take chances with storytelling. Because readers are far more forgiving of one rather misguided story than a completely misguided novel. I am, at least. And creatively speaking, I always love seeing someone jump off the springboard, whether or not they checked if there was any water in the pool.

Really, it's fifteen, twenty pages, so why not take the risk?

LW: What can we look forward to from you next?

CE: I'm juggling a new novel and a long non-fiction piece. I don't know if either will pan out, but as long as I'm showing up to work every day, I try to focus far more on the value of doing the work and far less on the romance of getting that work published before I've even done the work. You know what I mean?

LW: *Mississippi Review* recently released an issue on literary magazines – where do you weigh in on the online vs. print debate? Do you have a preference?

CE: For me, it's much like the difference between novels and short stories: I love to hold a book in my hands, to have something I can curl up with, which is what a print quarterly provides. On the other hand, online publications have tremendous freedom to experiment, to take the risks that I crave of new writing – to publish work no one else will, often because many print publications simply don't have the money/space/time/staff to provide more than a handful of short stories in any given issue. Now that I'm living overseas, I've become dependent on the online side of any given publication, whether it has a print edition or not. Down here, they're all equal. I just want work that surprises me, really.

As far as print goes, the sad truth is that, more often than not, it's very difficult to find a wide range of quarterlies in any given city – even New York. I used to spend countless hours at this hole in the wall, Niko's, on 6th Avenue and 12th Street. (God, I hope it's still there, despite the owner's chain-smoking!) Anyhow, at the time, I never had the money to buy anything, so I'd stand in the corner, reading entire 25-page stories, hoping I could finish before getting a dirty look. But they got just about everything that was out, so I'd pick up one book, flip through it, and then move on to the next.

Here books are extremely expensive, particularly English-language publications. So again, online is my primary source of information anymore. And as much as I love having a book in my hands, I care far more about that high of discovering some new voice, some new writer who is telling a story in a way that is so original and mind-blowing, I have to reread their story almost immediately. That's what matters to me – that exhilaration.