

INTERVIEW

WRITING FROM THE OUTSIDE: CAITLIN HORROCKS ON FOREIGN SETTINGS, THE STAKES OF CHILDHOOD, AND DRESS CODES FOR SPACE DOLPHINS

"Being in a foreign country, . . . I had to re-think my relationship to language, to my own sense of who I was in the world."

Caitlin Horrocks's first book, a collection of short stories titled *This Is Not Your City* (Sarabande Books), came out in 2011 to critical acclaim. Winner of numerous awards and fellowships, her stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *One Story*, and have been anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories 2011*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2009*, and *The Pushcart Prize XXXV*. In other words, Caitlin has managed to publish in nearly all the top journals and anthologies a fiction writer could hope for, and done so at a young age and in remarkably short order. Says Ron Carlson of *This Is Not Your City*, "Caitlin Horrocks is a stunning writer and these stories mark a brilliant debut."

The following interview took place over a series of emails in early 2012.

J.W. Wang: How goes everything? Any resolutions for 2012?

Caitlin Horrocks: I'd like to spend less time sitting on my butt. This is true in a big-picture way, but I also just mean that huge swaths of my professional life (writing, grading, reading, etc.) are spent sitting in a chair, and that's driving me crazy. So far, I've made myself a stand-

ing desk: I put my laptop on top of a cardboard box that I put on my dining room table. It's classy.

JW: Ever consider one of those kneeling chairs?

CH: An old roommate of mine had one. And one of my colleagues sits on a big balancing ball in his office. I'm open to suggestions.

JW: Can you tell us a little about the novel you're working on?

CH: I've been researching Erik Satie, a French composer and Very Strange Man. A sample: the performance indications in his music, rather than saying "Slow," or "Lento," etc., are commands like "With your bones dry and distant," "Apply yourself to renunciation," or "Without your fingers blushing." He made himself the head of a church he ran out of his apartment, and was an original 19th century hoarder — there were entire scores found buried after he'd died that he thought he'd lost. I still have a lot of unanswered questions as far as making a life into a book — I don't want to plod along, year by year, writing the novel equivalent of a biopic. But he's my subject.

JW: When do you think we should be expecting the novel?

CH: Wouldn't I love to know? No time soon, honestly. Historical fiction has been a whole new challenge. I stop writing every three minutes to look up things about the Franco-Prussian war and 19th century mussel farming in Normandy. Just when I thought my Google search history couldn't get any weirder.

JW: A common criticism the international literary community has for American literature is that it is overly insular, concerned primarily with American domestic issues and failing to address more global topics. A number of stories in *This Is Not Your City* are set

outside of the United States—two in Finland, one in Greece, and one in the Gulf of Aden—some with non-American protagonists. You're also making a French composer the topic of your novel. Is there something about dealing with foreign cultures that attracts you as a writer?

CH: Absolutely. Travel means observation, and most of the writers I know have spent at least a portion of our lives being the person leaning against the back wall, watching. Being in a foreign country, especially if you don't speak the language well, or at all, was for me a really intensified form of that. I've been both voluntarily and involuntarily invisible—sometimes I didn't want a store clerk to speak to me in a language I wouldn't understand, and sometimes I wanted very much to participate in the social or professional life around me, and wasn't able to. I had to re-think my relationship to language, to my own sense of who I was in the world. That's the basic, narcissistic side of my interest in other places, that experience of being an outsider.

As an outsider, you notice differences, see things about your native country or language you'd never thought about or articulated. You see different landscapes, different ways of living, different attitudes. You get to hear what people really think of where you're from. You have to look at things from additional angles. I think so much of fiction writing is empathy, so any additional angles the author can take on helps the work.

JW: What are some rewards you find working with these stories you don't find so much with stories set in the U.S.?

CH: There's a big risk that a foreign setting will just be window dressing for a story that could happen anywhere. Even when the characters are under a lot of specifically travel-related stress, I feel like there's a whole genre of Befuddled American Abroad stories that I'm wary of adding to. I'm especially proud of stories I've written where the

characters are of different nationalities than mine, and the places they're living feel really necessary to me as a writer and to the story I wanted to tell. Even in those stories, though, the main characters are still outsiders in some way. I don't know that I've written a story set outside the U.S. with characters who are totally comfortable with where they are. Although, what good character is? That sounds like a pretty boring protagonist.

JW: I think most editors, if they opened up a story and the first thing they saw were pictures and maps and drawings, they'd quickly hit the "no" button.

CH: Probably, although I'd like to think curiosity might get them past apoplexy about the formatting issues. But this was why I originally submitted that story ("It Looks Like This") exclusively to online magazines. I had the perception (fair or not) that those editors would be more open to this kind of story, and that it would be easier to do online than in print.

JW: What made you decide to go against conventional thinking with "It Looks Like This"? (Which, by the way, is as much fun as I've had reading a story in a long while.) Can you tell us a little about the conception and writing of this story?

CH: The story started as the last assignment in a "Forms of Fiction" course in graduate school: Create Your Own Form. I immediately had the idea of doing something illustrated, but then I didn't want it to feel halfhearted or lame. I wanted the pictures to feel necessary to the story, not just take up space. I think that idea, of taking up space, triggered the idea that for the narrator, the pictures are about taking up space, about helping her get through this difficult assignment to write about her life. I was also teaching intro composition at the time, so I'd probably been seeing a lot of papers with two-inch margins and

unnecessarily large pie graphs. In the story, I liked the way the images helped the narrator to be playful in ways she normally wouldn't. They helped me be playful as a writer, in a story that otherwise contains a lot of unhappiness.

JW: You often hear creative writing teachers warning students against writing from a child's perspective, or having children as protagonists. Childhood is one of the major themes in *This Is Not Your City*, with many children playing important, if not protagonist, roles in the stories. What is it about working with these characters and the theme of childhood that attracts you? Any advice for apprentice writers hoping to prove their teachers wrong?

CH: I think the warning comes from the idea that the stakes aren't big enough in childhood, that the ways kids act and react just doesn't matter to the degree our actions do as adults. I think this is partly a real challenge and partly bullshit.

"Zolaria" is all about childhood, but the full cost of what happens when the girls are young is only revealed when the narrator is older. I snuck into adulthood to make the story work. I've also made young characters older so they could get into more trouble and provide more conflict to the plot. Both of those can feel like a cheat. On the other hand, I tried to be really true to childhood experience in my story "At the Zoo": several of the little boy's sections were cut because the editors thought they seemed implausibly adult. If those bits weren't believable in the context of the story, that's on me, but the things that were cut were often things I remembered thinking, verbatim, as a child. And I wasn't an unusually brilliant kid.

I think children generally exist more deeply, more articulately, than we give them credit for, and it's easy to forget that the problems or concerns that feel small to adults feel overwhelming to them. The writer just needs to find some way to translate that sense of scale to the adult reader. I think Charles Baxter's "Gryphon," Susan Minot's

“Monkeys,” Z.Z. Packer’s “Brownies,” and Julie Orringer’s “Pilgrims,” all do this wonderfully.

JW: Many writers go for loud explosions and overt conflict. Much of the tension in your stories are psychologically rooted; in other people’s hands, these stories probably would’ve involved bullets and gunfire and all kinds of present action abuse. It’s remarkable how you’re able to get the readers invested in your characters through careful restraint and not resort to cheap tricks. Can you tell us about your process when figuring out what your stories are about?

CH: I would love to get a gun into a story and have it really mean something. My ambitions include blowing stuff up. But I totally agree that the stories in *This Is Not Your City* are rooted in psychological conflict, rather than physical. In another writer’s hands there might have been gunfire, but in other hands, I think even less would happen than in my version. I don’t write a lot of action, but I’m really interested in plot, in what readers know when, in how the disclosure of information can be manipulated without it feeling like a cheap trick. I feel like a lot of fiction writers (the ones who aren’t blowing stuff up) have just ceded plot to movies or television, or at least novels. I ask my students to think about what short stories do well, about playing to the strengths of the form (and these don’t tend to include pyro or world-building fantasy epics), but stories also don’t need to be limited to people having sad conversations with their loved ones and coming to uncomfortable realizations about their lives. I mean, my book is full of people having uncomfortable realizations about their lives. But I hope it doesn’t feel like those happen in a vacuum of ethereal thought.

JW: I suppose another way to ask this is, do you sit down with a specific conflict in mind, or do you build characters and let them lead you somewhere?

CH: I often have a fragment of both character and conflict, but I never have the whole story charted out. I feel my way through, with one scene or detail suggesting another. Partway through a draft I realize what the ending should be, and then I hope I can convincingly take the reader the rest of the way there.

JW: Having known many people who suffered sexual abuse as children, I was really happy to see that as one of the topics addressed in your book. It's something most people wouldn't touch as a subject, and it's far more prevalent than people would think. What were some considerations you had to deal with when you decided to work this into a story?

CH: I'm assuming you're talking about the story "Steal Small," which started entirely with the half that's now about "bunching" dogs. I love dogs, so this was one of the more terrible things I could imagine people doing. The story started as an exploration of what kind of people could possibly rationalize that cruelty. I ended up with one character who just doesn't see it as a big deal. But the other regrets what she's doing, and as I thought about what her backstory was, I arrived at her sister's sexual abuse. Lyssa already sees this failure to protect her sister as so massive that there's no going back from it, no capacity to rescue anything or anyone anymore, including herself. My main worry, writing the story, was that it would feel too neat and calculated. The parallel between Lyssa's failure to help her sister and her failure to help the dogs is awfully tight. Real life is usually messier, but I hoped the parallel would feel warranted, and relevant. It was also important to me that the sister, in the little bit we see of her, be more of a survivor than a victim. Lyssa's a survivor, too, but in a much more compromised way.

JW: How long do you think Bev is going to keep up her guinea pig blog at <http://guineapigcity.tumblr.com/>?

CH: Right now, the last entry is January 1, 2012. A date for starting things, not stopping them, but I'm feeling at a loss as to what to do with the blog. I think there's a place in the world (and in Bev's heart) for a blog that posts literally nothing but daily guinea pigs, but the fiction writer in me is screaming that I need to do something with the blog, create some kind of narrative with it. And I don't know what that would be. Part of being a short story writer, rather than a novelist, is that my characters really just stop for me where the story stops. Credit for the guinea pig Tumblr actually goes to a friend and fellow writer Elliott Holt, who suggested it because *The New Yorker* had asked me what happened to Bev after the story ended and I didn't have a clue.

JW: You've lived in so many different places: Phoenix, Ann Arbor, England, Finland, the Czech Republic. What is your city?

CH: Right now, Grand Rapids. Which is the entirely dull and factual answer, but I also feel very much at home here. I accepted a job here over the phone, sight unseen, when my partner Todd and I had to make the decision to move across the country while I was sitting in a hotel room in China and he was at our house in Arizona. I'd never been to Grand Rapids, and most of what I'd heard about the city was frankly not positive. Fortunately, most of what I thought I knew was either just wrong or a couple of decades out of date. There's a lot happening here, a lot of energy and momentum and support for art and artists of all kinds (yes, even in rust-belt Michigan). I'm truly happy to be a part of that. It's a great beer town, too.

JW: What's your beer, then?

CH: Bell's Two-Hearted Ale, but since that's made in Kalamazoo, I'll give the honors to Founder's Red's Rye.

JW: So, magical realism. Or something fantastical, anyway. I have

to say I really enjoyed “Embodied,” and the mad scientist in “At the Zoo.”

CH: Thanks! I’ve loved a lot of magical realist authors and stories, and it’s something I’ve wanted to play more with in my own writing. I’ve noticed I respond to it as an editor, too—a magical realist story can fail as easily as any other kind, but it’s immediately less likely to bore the reader along the way.

JW: What were some of your past lives?

CH: I do get déjà vu, but only for things it feels like I’ve dreamed, not lived before. If my lungs and eyesight in other lives were anything like they are in this one I would have died young, repeatedly.

JW: Are space dolphins just . . . dolphins in space?

CH: When we were kids, my sister had school folders with really over the top designs by a “Hawaii-based marine artist” (Christian Lassen, online at <http://www.lassenart.com/>). Think Lisa Frank with whales. Looking at his website, I don’t think his dolphins are actually in space so much as cavorting with orcas and white horses under the stars. But I remembered them as being in space.

JW: Do they wear those air helmet things?

CH: They think they’re too pretty. They just hold their breath.

JW: What are you currently reading? Any recommendations?

CH: The last few months I made a real effort to find more time to read, especially newer books. I was mostly successful. I recommend the novels *What You See in the Dark* by Manuel Muñoz and *Swamplandia!*

by Karen Russell. For story collections, Danielle Evans' *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*, and Roxane Gay's *Ayiti*, were both very good. It's not new, but I read *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* by Randall Kenan a couple of months ago, and it blew my doors off.

JW: Besides more reading and writing, what have you found to be the most useful or inspiring towards your writing?

CH: My novel was partly inspired by Satie's piano music, but that's the first time I've had musical inspiration. I was just creating a playlist for *This Is Not Your City* for a music blog, and realized that there's essentially no music in the entire book. I'm trying not to place new characters in such silence. I've written at least one story inspired by a painting (Monet's "Camille on her Death Bed"), but it was really bad. I have a story inspired by *The Oregon Trail* computer game. Like most writers I know, I try to stay open to anything and everything. I recently watched the Czech film *Something Like Happiness* and it made me want to write, but I haven't figured out what yet.

JW: Any parting advice for us? On duty-free shopping? Visiting roadside attractions? Raising guinea pigs?

CH: On visiting roadside attractions: yes, do this. THE THING?: WHAT IS IT? in Arizona is a treat. (For the overall experience. THE THING? itself is pretty lame.) More generally? I've never been a writer who keeps a regular schedule, who writes every day and studies craft books. That's worked for me so far. But especially as I've tried to transition from writing stories, where I feel like I have some kind of clue, to a novel, where I have none, I've been even more procrastinatory than usual. In that spirit, rather than giving advice, here's some advice from Ann Patchett that I'm trying to take myself right now: "The trick, after all, is not to convince the rest of the world I need to be working. The trick is to convince myself." ■