

An Interview With Katharine Haake

by Jeff Meyers

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Katherine Haake's first book of short stories, *No Reason on Earth*, was published in 1986 by Dragon Gate Press. More recent work includes a novel and a second collection of stories, some of which have appeared in such places as *Witness*, *The Iowa Review*, *Mississippi Review*, and *the minnesota review*.

Katherine is currently an English Professor at CSUN. She is director of the department's writing program and has been the faculty advisor for the *Northridge Review*. She holds graduate degrees from Stanford and the University of Utah.

She resides in Los Angeles with her husband and two young sons.

Q When did you start writing?

A I started in grade school. I was the type of person who always wanted to be a writer until I read *Moby Dick* when I was 17. Then I realized I wasn't smart enough or talented enough to be a writer and I stopped writing for four years.

Q Do you write because you can't help it? Is it an obsession?

A That's what I used to say. I used to say that a writer writes because a writer can't do anything else, meaning as in a compulsion, also meaning as in there are precious few things that the writer can actually do well. As it turns out I realize there are lots of things that I could do. Through teaching the Theory [of Fiction] course I suddenly realized that one of the reasons I write is that I like the self that is me, the self that is constituted in the act of writing. It's a different self than any other self that I have...and I depend on it.

Q Is writing then an act of discovery? Do you discover another self through your writing?

A No. It's a state of being more than anything else. A state of

being in a particular moment. I'm also becoming increasingly interested in how a moment, any moment, is constructed in fiction. When you're writing, the *only* important thing is that exact moment in the fiction, and when you're *really* writing...that is the self that is inhabiting that moment. It's another way of saying that this has become almost all *process* for me.

Q Would you agree with the idea that writing is becoming more theory informed, so that if you don't know what the theories are then your writing is going to be limited?

A That's true in literary fiction, in some literary fiction. I don't think that you can say that's altogether true in mainstream American publishing, since publishers are out to make money.

Q Annie Dillard writes in *Living By Fiction* that fiction, "insofar as it is traditional, has a large and paying audience whose tastes serve to keep it traditional." Would you agree, and do you consider your writing as traditional or non-traditional?

A Yes, I would agree with that, and I think it's part of the way the publishing institution operates to govern the types of writings that get published. I would characterize my writing as being non-traditional. Readers deserve certain kinds of gratification in their reading, and what I have wanted to do since I became self-conscious about writing is to write stories that provide certain types of traditional gratification, while at the same time are self-conscious constructions of language, so that the reader is positioned in such a way as to read a traditional story at the same time as the reader is being instructed in how to read. A friend of mine says that the only thing that she's interested in doing is to renegotiate narrative conventions in such a way as to make a hair's breadth of difference in the reader subsequent to the reading of the story, so that the fictions *become* commentaries on their own conventions, and in doing so, *change*, in a hair's breadth of a way, the way the reader reads forever after.

Q In your story "The Woman in the Water" the narrator breaks in at many points and addresses the reader directly as "you." At one point the narrator speaks to the reader saying "You want things to proceed logically, and with a clear purpose to their order, toward

some transcendent point of resolution.” Is this what we as readers want, a “transcendent point of resolution?” Your stories seem to play with the delay of that, the delay of the gratification. This seems to be something in common with all of your stories that I’ve read, you seem to be saying this over and over. Do you feel like you’re writing the same story?

A I think that you only ever write one story, although that is the largest concern I have about this book; it’s too similar. I think that there’s certainly a progression. “The Woman in the Water” was the second to the last story that I wrote in the book, and it ends in a refusal, a refusal to narrate in a conventional sense, which is also related to this sense of providing conventional gratifications in a way that’s interesting. More and more I see this book as being about refusals, which is a feminist perspective.

Q How can women writers avoid, as Terry Eagleton warns, “speaking the myths men would have them speak”?

A (Quietly) They can’t. How can you get outside of discourse? How can you get outside of culture that is patriarchal at its core? You can’t do it. It’s the same thing as how can you get outside of the story when you’re in the story? You can’t get outside of the story. The only thing you can do is to reveal the structure of the story, to reveal the conventions that are holding the story in place. The only thing that women can do is to acknowledge the dilemma. The quote I use is: “As long as women remain silent they remain outside of history, but if they should enter history speaking and acting as men do then they enter history subdued and alienated. It is a history that logically speaking their speech should disrupt.” Since you can’t enter history without “speaking and acting as men do” your only option is to illuminate the dilemma, to make visible what is invisible about the bind, the double bind. In a way that might be deconstructing a moment even while you are constructing it. I don’t know what that means, but it may be what’s going on.

Q Are you attempting to do more than simply challenge the dominant patriarchal culture with the theory that informs your writing...are you challenging, are you illuminating?

A I’m rejecting. Whether it’s a challenge or not depends on the

degree of credibility the writing is given. I had a teacher that said “if you want to do feminist writing you have to do it better than anybody else,” and it made me really mad when she said it, but it’s true, if it doesn’t get published, no one reads it. I used to be interested in publication for personal reasons; I’m interested in it for other reasons now. So maybe it is a challenge. I don’t see it as being *only* feminist, and I don’t see culture as being *only* patriarchal, since it seems to me that women inhabit many of the positions that men have inhabited. I do think fiction is interesting when it reveals things to us about how we structure our lives, how we use stories to create meaning. Not the stories themselves, but the process.

Q Is there a difference between what you’re writing says and what it means?

A (Laughter) I had this ongoing discussion with my dissertation advisor, and he always said that I was the most disingenuous person that he’d ever known. I never understood this, and insisted that I was, on the contrary, the most ingenuous person that had ever lived. Recently I was in Utah and once again we had this exchange, and I said “But Francois, I *always* mean what I say,” and he said, “Yes, but you never say what you mean,” which is probably true. It’s also interesting insofar as it’s about subtext. It’s about narrative strategies that women have had to develop because women are not supposed to say certain things. So in writing by women, I’ve always been interested, and I think I also use it in my work, a sort of circuitous, evasive narrative strategy. But it’s also true psychoanalytically that the most powerful stuff is submerged.

Q And if we’re writing from language and not from image, that possibly allows submerged depths to come up to the surface more often than if we would write the other way around.

A Right. Because the unconscious, as we know from Lacan, is structured like a language.

Q You use prolepsis and analepsis a lot in your stories, and you also highlight the relationship between the text’s *histoire* and *recit*. Is this to highlight the way in which language generates meaning, the way stories generate meaning?

A Stories generate language. It’s a function of the way I work, but

it's also a function of the way that anything is possible in language --what's interesting, what's fun...you know. It's not very fun the way a camera might record minutely what goes on in any given scene, it's fun to use language to make leaps and connections. I think that it's self-referential in that it reveals or highlights the degree to which this is a construction of language. But in any given moment...my friend Mary Ann talks about illumination as taking place in a glance, and in any given moment anything is possible in language. In any given moment you can move in language from one place to another. That's interesting to me, the glance is interesting to me, the movement is interesting to me. In the piece that I read in my Theory of Fiction class last semester, there was a line that read, "How easily in language one can move through the history of a century or a culture." What I'm working on now is simultaneity; how many things can be brought together in a given fictional moment.

Q That approach to writing brings us back to "The Woman in the Water" where the main character, Penelope, is seeing in circular ways and "wandering," which is more interesting than moving in a straight line.

A It's what I refer to as "contiguous" discourse: following the metonymical logic of the moment, rather than the metaphorical logic. I worked for a long time figuring out how to write sentences, and Francois and I had this long debate over whether there's such a thing as a "female sentence." He said there wasn't and I said there was, and eventually he read my book and said, "You're right Kate, there is one, and I want to write it too." But then he defined it as being "groping"; I don't know what "groping" was all about, but I think that a female sentence is a sentence that is in some way at odds with the dominant discourse. That does not have to be a "groping" sentence, it just has to have some degree of discomfort, some degree of resistance to dominant discourse, which is in this culture patriarchal. But for me it had to do with a sentence that was informed by a logic of contiguity, which may or may not be related to female sexuality, and a sentence that is willing at any point to move from any one point to any other point and discovers itself in the act of

articulation. Probably a sentence that proceeds from language rather than a straightforward idea that gets translated into...one of the things that Feminist theory provided me with was the authority to go ahead and write sentences like that, and at some point, once I had figured it out...because I had started out trying to write short minimalist sentences. I thought that's what you're supposed to write like. So once I finally felt authorized to write these sentences—and for a long time they were deliberately awkward, they were deliberately resisting the cadence and structure of conventional sentences—then I got this idea that it would be interesting to write stories that structurally replicated the structure of these sentences. In some ways it was a linguistic move to start making those leaps in stories, but in other ways it was a structural move, to move the stories in the same way the sentences moved, in the same contiguous logic.

Q So you're modeling the stories after the sentence. The sentence is the basic unit.

A It was, but now get this. Now I'm structuring the novel after the story, after the sentences. I thought, well, if you can write a story like this, why can't you write a novel like this?

Q Who do you see as particularly good story-tellers right now? Who do you like to read?

A Cortazar has meant a lot to me...and Gordimer. Kundera *had*, but I'd been reading *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and it's so intensely misogynistic that I couldn't bear it. Louise Erdrich is an interesting writer, and there are lots of writers. Some of my reading for this summer...I'd like to read more Native American writers.

Q There's so much of it being published, too.

A Yes, there's a lot of writing that's being made available, and that's exciting. Actually, I'd like to spend the summer reading *among* writers of color from this country. Reading also Asian Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, because I feel that's an area where in the past five years an explosion has occurred and I'd like to explore it.

Q Do you think that fiction writing can do anything to change the state of the world?

A At one point as an adolescent, when I had started writing again, I was at the time politically active. I was never much of the nature to go out into the world all that much, so my activities were limited but I did go through a very self-conscious period when I decided that writing could be a political activity. I think that in some cultures writing can be a very *powerful* political tool: in South America, and in other parts of the world. A friend of mine talks about what she calls “dangerous writing,” and what she’s talking about is transgressive writing, and it always used to bug me, because it seemed to me that in America writing can’t really be termed “dangerous,” in comparison to the dangers that writers face in other parts of the world: personal dangers. It wasn’t until years later that I started to figure out that writing *can* be political, but in a very different way than I had thought at the time. That is, it can be used in a way to reorient the reader in relation to language and the construction of meaning in the world. I don’t think that it’s something that happens on a conscious level. I think that writing that renegotiates cultural and literary codes, for example, produces a kind of subjectivity in the reader that can be transformative. Writing reveals the ways in which language and narratives inscribe certain positions of power and authority. Even writing non-linear stories rewrites what we think of as a story, and forces us to question the virtue of “the straight line” in other respects as well. But I think it only happens in very small ways.

Q But it has changed *your* life.

A Yes, it’s changed my life.

Q And if it changed your life, then it can change any life, and if it changes any more lives then the global reality will change.

A One would hope. I was on the interview team for a position in Critical Theory. One applicant was on a Fulbright in Czechoslovakia—pre and post revolution—and one was a Chinese exile. Both spoke with some passion about the degree to which the radical nature of a text depended upon the position in the culture. They said that although in the West we’re accustomed to seeing Formalism and Aestheticism as being reactionary in repressive societies such as pre-revolutionary Czechoslovakia or China, Aestheticism and

Formalism were the *only* ways in which writers could be radical, could challenge the system. They did this by presenting a highly formalized or highly aestheticized text in which the challenge was more deeply embedded. Or, even the fact that formalistic art is a challenge to a culture that preaches the virtues of Socialist Realism. So I think that what makes writing powerful, what makes writing political, is the way in which it tends to reconceptualize the reader's position in that particular culture. And it reveals ideology, reveals the workings of the culture.

Q Would you agree that it's impossible for anyone to be free of ideology?

A You can't get outside of it. You can't get outside of discourse. You can't get outside of language, how can you get outside of language?

Q Ideology *is* language.

A Language embeds ideology.

Q And the world is a text.

A That's right. Interesting writing is writing that forces us to read the *world* as textual, instead of reading the world in the text.

