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Come in...and be captivated...



"Morning in the Garden" by Jan Collins Selman; www.jancollinsselman.com

This issue we interview Jodi Picoult in the wake of her recent novel, Sing

You Home. Due to the author's schedule, we had to keep the interview to the length that follows but we learn about the strong voices of character, presenting varied viewpoints and what's in store for Picoult fans!

Jodi Picoult is a national best-selling author who has been awarded the New England Bookseller Award for fiction and has over 14 million copies of her books in print. Three of her novels have reached #1 on the New York Times best-seller list. Picoult studied writing at Princeton University and holds a master's degree in education from Harvard University.

Jodi Picoult Interview by Denise Bouchard

1) Driving your children to school one day, you wrote that you were asked what you would choose to have as a superpower. (I loved that by the way- my daughter and I had many such discussions!) You said you would like to have a combination of telepathy and mind control- the ability to change people's thoughts and feelings. I feel you've accomplished this through your writing. You make us, your readers, feel deeply and most importantly, you show all sides of a situation by portraying the point-of-view possessed by each character, bringing us from awareness to tolerance. You've said, however, that there's a big difference between tolerance and acceptance. I feel that you did a particularly superb job in your latest book, *Sing You Home*, of raising awareness and understanding. You get people talking. Are you aware of the bridge-building influence you're having on the world towards the acceptance of the big issues?

It is always my hope to get people talking when I write a book. I don't necessarily believe you have to change your mind about a controversial subject but you should be willing to hear the other side's POV and maybe ask yourself why your opinion is what it is. Gay rights are very polarizing in this country; personally, I find that an embarrassment for America and wish that we could grant what I see as being the last set of civil rights we haven't granted yet. I hope that the characters in Sing You Home make those who are afraid that gay rights might erode family values

realize that in fact gay and lesbian couples want the same things straight couples want: the ability to raise a loving family with a committed partner.

2) I love the fact that when I read your books I always learn something or something new is tried- that whales sing and that the songs are different on the opposite coasts... the difficulties of IVF... the extent of what good stem cell research can do... music therapy used as a healing modality for Parkinson's, stroke, etc... graphic arts tried as a new way to convey a story in *Tenth Circle* with the added intrigue of a hidden message (very cool)... and in your latest, a cd soundtrack- what a beautiful and innovative addition to *Sing You Home* (more on that later). What interesting lessons are in the future for Jodi Picoult's readers?

In 2012 you're going to learn more than you ever thought possible about wolves and wolfpack behavior. I spent time with a man who actually lived in the wild for a year with a pack to do my research. They're incredible animals! That book explores the roles within a family, after a tragic accident leaves a father in a vegetative state - and the two siblings disagree about whether or not to terminate life support.

3) This showing of all sides of an issue in a 360 degree perspective from all of the different characters reminds me of Dickens and *A Christmas Carol* where we're shown things behind the scenes which we wouldn't ordinarily see and it changes us, makes us think. You pull this off masterfully. Now for us writers, any commentary on structuring a book this way? It would seem enormously hard work because you're essentially debating with yourself at points. I can also see where it would be fun as well, and I also imagine your characters must sometimes surprise you with their quirky hidden agendas and personalities. Still, how do you juggle all of this so well? No matter your beliefs you can still objectively report on those of others.

I've heard of writers who, in writing multiple first person narratives, will write all of one voice, and then all of another, and intercut them. I don't. I write the book exactly as you see it. I do feel that the voices "speak" to me- it's more my job to transcribe what I hear in my head than to actually create those voices (weird, I know). The characters arrive so real to me that they have very strong opinions, and it's easy for me to relay what they need to say, because they're so adamant!

4) In your latest book, *Sing You Home*, a same sex couple deals with prejudice of a different kind, an extreme right wing element in a state rife with narrow-minded ignorance. The innovative addition of a cd allows us to really get inside the head of the very-likable protagonist, Zoe and helps us to really feel the story on a deeper level. It becomes no longer just another hot-button issue but just about people. Ellen Wilbur's lovely voice and your insightful lyrics brought the book to life singing us through awareness, tolerance and perhaps for many, acceptance. I especially love the verses in "The Mermaid" and "Where You Are". Do you think that this will be the way of future novels- either pairing with the arts or music? I for one certainly hope so. Here at our magazine we love to pair artwork and or music with our words which seems to make them jump off of the page.

I have tried pushing the envelope of fiction before because I think there are many ways to tell a story - that was the point of the comic book in the Tenth Circle too. In the case of *Sing You Home*, I thought it was really important for readers to hear Zoe's voice. Not just in a narrative, but literally. Since she's a songwriter, what better way for her to pour out her heart to you? I think that as we see the rise of e-books, you'll have more "enhancements" - art or music or whatever attached - but this is a bit different, I think, because it's so organically tied to the character and the story she's trying to tell you.



"Blue Notes" by Jan Collins Selman; www.jancollinsselman.com

*Here to discuss the essence of writing with us is Meg Waite Clayton- the national bestselling author of *The Wednesday Sisters*, *The Language of Light* and debuting March 22nd, *The Four Ms. Bradwells*.*

*Clayton's attention to historic detail paired with her extensive background in law create in-depth novels that reflect the strength of women over the decades. *The Language of Light*, was a finalist for Barbara Kingsolver's *Bellwether Prize* and *The Wednesday Sisters* became a national bestseller as well as a book club favorite. Clayton holds her law degree from the *University of Michigan Law School* and was a former *Tennessee Williams Scholar* at the *Sewanee Writers' Conference*.*

Meg Waite Clayton Interview by Nicole M. Bouchard

1) You use a great deal of experience (personal or shared), people and

history as inspiration for your novels. When it comes to combining these elements of real life with imagined fiction, do you find it more difficult to incorporate the truth-inspired material and re-create those moments (as though there are standards, expectations, facts or familiar faces to please) as opposed to constructing scenes purely from scratch?

I do occasionally use a real-life moment relatively unaltered. In The Four Ms. Bradwells, Ginger's sitting-across-the-dinner-table-from-the-empty-chair scene, for example, draws heavily from my own feelings when my oldest son went off to college. I don't ever feel constrained by the actual facts when I'm borrowing from my own life, though. If anything, I probably prefer to consider paths other than those I've lived. The lie can be so much more revealing of the truth than the truth itself.

When I'm dealing with historical data, though – the start-up Danny works for in The Wednesday Sisters, for example, is based on a real company, and the women's gathering in the square is based on a real gathering – I work really hard to get the facts right. I love the research, though; it often leads me to places I'd never have imagined myself.

2) One of your favorite quotes by novelist Tim O'Brien reads, "Try to use the extraordinary--in your character's actions--to illuminate the ordinary emotions we all experience." On a similar wavelength, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "Reporting the extreme things as if they were the ordinary things will start you on the art of fiction." The way the women survive and interact in *The Wednesday Sisters*, *The Four Ms. Bradwells* and Nelly's role as protagonist in *The Language of Light* seems to use these philosophies as modes of survival through greatness and sorrows, rebuilding a life as a widow by confronting the foundations of the past, relating the extraordinary on a park bench or witnessing a friend brave a crucial life moment at a Senate hearing as she coils a pearl necklace into her hands. Is the behavior of these characters purposely meant to make a point about the psychology of women and how they often process the extremes of life with reserve as

opposed to the historical, patriarchal perception that women react on a more dramatic, emotional basis?

I go back to the Tim O'Brien quote time and time again, but I'll confess to never having heard the Fitzgerald version, much as I love his writing. I'm adding it to my favorite quote list.

On whether I'm purposefully making a point about the psychology of women, I don't know. When I sit down to write, I'm not thinking about making any kind of point, to be honest. I'm just taking a few characters and examining what their lives might be like under certain circumstances. I do learn a lot about myself in the process. In writing *The Language of Light*, for example, I learned through examining how Nelly dealt with emotionally unsupportive men – both her father and her husband, in different ways and for different reasons – how very important the support of my own father and my own husband have been.

I do hope the characters in my novels represent a range of emotional responses, though. I'm not sure Kath's little episode in her car, for example, would qualify as "understated." But I do think on the whole that women are often much less dramatic and more able to address our emotions than we are sometimes given credit for. My own friends are thoughtful, intelligent women, and I suppose what comes out in my fictional friends is that truth I see in my real-life ones.

3) We've read and learned of writers who use journaling for a wide array of purposes whether it extends to their craft, is designed to foster a certain mind set (such as a gratitude journal or purging one's self of morning frustration) or whether it remains simply as a private channel of inner expression. You spoke of having taken your journal along to a park when you encountered, by chance, a prominent character from *The Wednesday Sisters*, by way of a passing blonde stranger in a baseball cap. Would you say

that you use journaling as a way to open your mind to ideas and beat the 'block' so you can continue your creative work or do you utilize your journal for whatever purpose it serves at a given time (personal or professional)?

Absolutely. My journal is very liberating because when I'm writing in it, I'm only writing for myself. The ones I've kept over the years make a quite embarrassingly record of pity parties and rants – so much so that my best friend has instructions in the event I predecease her to race to my office, grab my journals and burn them before anyone else can see what's written in them. I use them as a way to fool myself, too: if what I'm writing isn't meant to "be" anything, then my little internal editor takes a rest. She plays a very important role, my internal editor. But if she shows up to the party before it gets going, that party will be a dreadful bust. Really, if she shows up first, everyone else runs the other way.

4) Your innovative author website is absolutely delightful for visiting readers and fellow writers. The features which include in-depth character sketches, historical research, behind-the-scenes reasoning and the particularly delightful 'writers' desk' on your craft are a beautiful way to reach and involve your audience as well as guide other writers along the path. Due to your clear devotion to the field and your embracing manner, have you contemplated doing a non-fiction book on writing?

I'm so glad you enjoy the website. It's always such fun to put material for the pages together and turn them over to my web designer, Ilsa Brink. What she does with it all is a little bit of magic. She can even make photos I've taken look good.

The desk on the writers' page is a photograph of my actual desk, although admittedly a tad tidier than it usually is. Or a lot tidier. It's meant as a small payback into the collective pool for all the encouragement and support I've gotten along the way from other writers. I do love encouraging other writers. For me,

writing has been so rewarding in so many ways that I have this urge to stick a pen in the hands of everyone I meet and say, "Really give it a try. You'll be amazed."

One of the most wonderful things to come of writing for me is the learning about myself that is involved – not that what I learn is always wonderful, but there is a peace that comes of trying to understand oneself.

I haven't ever thought about doing a non-fiction book, though. My training is in history and psychology and the law. I'm quite afraid a non-fiction book would expose the things I don't know about writing, or lead others astray. I have been trying to persuade my friend Harriet Scott Chessman to write one, though. She is one of the most thoughtful writers on the subject of writing I know. And the writing books I would most like to read that remain unwritten: one by Tim O'Brien, or by Alice McDermott. If only one of them would write one!

5) In mentioning your process when embarked on a novel, you've described writing a few chapters and then doing detailed character sketches and plot progression/outline through the use of note cards. It jumped out as a point of fascination because typically many authors do the reverse. We'd love to hear more about this process and how the story speaks to you through it as well as if you follow a similar pattern in developing your short fiction, as in "Imagining Isabella", where, as the story went on, the car seemed a metaphor for Isabella herself, explaining her relationship to her brother and his lack of control over her as she became more defined.

They do? I guess I've got it backward! Perhaps the problem for me is that the story rarely – at least in the early, first draft stages – speaks to me. The process is more like me hunting around everywhere I can imagine in the hopes of uncovering something that I can beat on, in hopes it will make some small yelp that might turn into words on the page. That's one of the

reasons I read and research so much, in the never-ending quest for interesting material to shape into a story.

My invariable answer to the question of how an aspiring writer should start is, 'Any way you can.' That's the way I start myself. I do tend to start writing in my journal on the pretense that it's nothing, then move to a computer when I have some kind of little start. That's true for short stories as well as novels. I will often start with an overheard sentence (I'm a dreadful eavesdropper) or a description of something, just to get the ink flowing.

I don't often step back and outline or figure out where the story is going until I have something that feels like a start, because that's often when the whole mess starts to feel like its splattering me; if that happens before I'm committed to the story, it ends up in the recycle bin. But I will occasionally wake up with a first line that feels right, and just open up a new document and start typing.

I rarely outline short stories; I can hold a whole short story in my head. I start them the same way, and I do step back and think about where they might be going, but I don't seem to need the same pausing and gearing up for the long haul that I go through in writing a novel. If I take a wrong turn in a short story, I can toss and backtrack. For a novel, I can spend a lot of wasted time writing to a dead end if I don't map things out.

*The way I write turns out to be an evolving process, though. Starting with *The Four Ms. Bradwells*, Ballantine has been kind enough to agree to publish books I haven't yet written, based on proposal. For *The Four Ms. Bradwells*, I did have the characters and some words on the page by the time I began talking about it with my then editor; it was at least in the neighborhood of that ready-to-plot/outline stage. For the new one I'm working on*

now, I just tossed out some ideas and my editor and I, with input from others at Ballantine, sorted out together which book would be best for my next one. My editor is really fabulous, and I feel very safe in her hands. It's quite liberating: with her, I can toss out any idea I fear may be hideous without worry that she'll run screaming from the room.

6) Having pursued at first a doctoral education and then a legal career, your discipline has to be exemplary. Translating those skills for detail and organization, your novels include in-depth portraits of history, accurate down to the letter. Tell us about the 'research bible' binders upon your desk, the journey of a historic novel and how to whip our notes and piles into shape!

I do a lot of research in the early stages, just trying to steep myself in both the things I need to know to write something – for example, what a Supreme Court confirmation process is like in *The Four Ms. Bradwells* – and other things that catch my interest as I'm writing. I throw it all in a huge three-ring binder with dividers. The dividers for *The Four Ms. Bradwells* include ones for Michigan Law School, Holga Cameras, Women in the Law and Politics, the Chesapeake Bay, Green Building, and Women's Rights, among others. I also keep approximately three hundred million bookmarks to internet sites, generally foldered under the same kind of topic tabs.

I find that if I take something that I'm interested in and toss it into a story, it mixes things up a bit in a way that can work well. So, for example, for *The Four Ms. Bradwells*, while I've always enjoyed reading poetry, I've never known much about how it's written. I thought if I made one of the characters a poet it would give me both the excuse to read poetry in the afternoon and call it work and the impetus to learn more about how it's written. I just started tagging poems in the volumes I owned with no idea how I would use them, and expanding my poetry library, and

adding books about the writing of poetry too.

Then when I was writing from Ginger's point of view or Ginger was speaking, I'd go back and double-check my research, or do a hunt through the poetry section of the binder for a telling detail that would make it believable that she was someone who wrote poetry. In her point of view, because she uses lines from poetry on a regular basis, I would often go in search of a line to fit the need. I spent hours sometimes, looking for just the right line. It's perhaps not the most efficient way to write, but it made for really lovely writing time.

7) Momentous Motivation: Taped to your pen holder is the phrase, "The great pleasure in life is doing what people say you cannot do." (I've always found the words 'no' or 'can't' to be the most mischievous and deliciously effective in pushing me forward through life.) You also advocate combating obstacles and rejection by celebrating each victory and appreciating the support of your loved ones such as the gift of the armadillo from your two sons upon publishing your first piece. What else motivates a smart, savvy woman such as yourself? (e.g. role models of strong women in history, ancestry, outside influences, events, memories...)

Ah, that fortune-cookie saying! It's been on the pen holder my uncle gave me for a lot of years now. And I agree with you about "no" and "can't."

I'm certainly motivated by a wide range of role models – writers and photographers and women accomplishing extraordinary things. It's so much easier to begin something after you've watched someone else do it once or twice than to make it up yourself out of whole cloth.

But I think the thing that really keeps me writing is the people I meet and hear and see, and the desire to understand the world around me. I suppose I think that the whole world must surely

fall into a more friendly place for all of us – women and men – if only we all understood each other better. I hope my writing might add in some small way to that understanding.

*Here we would like to thank featured past and present authors for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss the craft of writing with them.

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