The Write Place At the Write Time

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We had the distinct pleasure of chatting with Janet Fitch, best-selling author of the scintillating novel *White Oleander* which was not only selected to be part of Oprah's Book Club, but was also made into a feature film with Michelle Pfeiffer, Renée Zellweger, and Alison Lohman. Ms. Fitch is also the author of the darkly powerful and potent best-selling novel, *Paint it Black*. A beautifully raw and descriptively brilliant writer, Ms. Fitch finds the untold stories in the unlikely spaces.

Questions for Janet Fitch Interview by Nicole M. Bouchard

1)With your debut fiction novel, *White Oleander*, you changed the way people perceived their everyday lives through the use of your characters and their experiences by showing many of the true hardships that exist in society.

THANK YOU.

How does one go about writing a first novel so provocatively dynamic?

I DIDN'T INTEND TO DO SO, I'M JUST INTERESTED IN WRITING ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ARE MISSING IN LITERATURE. VOICELESS PEOPLE. STORIES THAT HAVEN'T BEEN TOLD.

2) How and when did you know with certainty that you wanted to be a writer-

I WAS 21, LIVING IN ENGLAND ON A STUDENT EXCHANGE. WOKE UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT AND REALIZED I WANTED TO WRITE FICTION AND NOT BECOME AN

HISTORIAN, WHICH WAS WHERE I'D BEEN HEADING.

and what direct experiences/individuals inspired you the most?

I'M INSPIRED BY OTHER WRITERS. FOR ME IT WAS POE, SANDBURG, DOSTOYEVSKY, FAULKNER, JOYCE CAROL OATES, ANAIS NIN, HENRY MILLER, JOAN DIDION, KATE BRAVERMAN, RAYMOND CHANDLER, JOHN LE CARRE, DICKENS, LAURENCE DURRELL, MALCOLM LOWRY, ANNE SEXTON, DYLAN THOMAS, SEI SHONAGON, EURIPIDES, TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, AND INGMAR BERGMAN.

3) Your understanding of human nature in your work seems deeply accurate and ancient in its dimensions.

THANK YOU.

In both of your novels, *White Oleander,* and its powerful successor, *Paint it Black*, you display how people transform through great pain to new strength and depth. Do you feel that what we make of our circumstances is what makes us grow and defines our character?

I THINK WE LEARN MORE FROM FAILURE THAN SUCCESS. IT BRINGS US TO CONSCIOUSNESS. PAIN FORCES US TO AWAKEN AND DO SOMETHING. I DON'T THINK IT INSPIRES EVERYONE TO GROWTH AND NEW DEPTH AND HUMANITY, BUT IT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO DO SO. ITS WHAT I'M INTERESTED IN.

4) How do you want you and your work to be remembered and perceived in future generations?

I OBVIOUSLY WOULD LIKE MY WORK NOT TO BE BOUND TO THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF HERE AND NOW, I'D LIKE PEOPLE TO READ ME IN FIFTY YEARS AND RESPOND TO MY WORK AS STRONGLY AS PEOPLE RIGHT NOW. I HOPE I'M SPEAKING DEEPLY ENOUGH TO THE HUMAN CONDITION TO BE RESONANT IN THE FUTURE, BECAUSE THE HUMAN

CONDITION—LOVE, LOSS, STRUGGLE, THE SEARCH FOR MEANING AND IDENTITY—DOES NOT CHANGE OVER TIME, ONLY THE TRAPPINGS CHANGE.

What mark/impression do you want your stories to leave on the world and what, most importantly, do you want your individual readers to walk away with after having read your work?

I WANT TO PUT PEOPLE MORE IN TOUCH WITH THE RICHNESS OF DAILY LIFE, OF THE SENSUAL WORLD—WE RUSH AROUND SO MUCH WE FORGET TO REALLY EXPERIENCE SENSUAL REALITY, AND WE'RE ANIMALS, WE CRAVE THAT SO MUCH. WRITING GIVES ME TIME TO PONDER QUESTIONS WHICH MOST PEOPLE DON'T HAVE TIME TO CONTEMPLATE UNTIL SOMETHING REALLY SHAKES THEIR WORLD. I WANT TO SORT OF PRE-SHAKE THEIR WORLD, SO THEY CAN CONTEMPLATE SOME OF THESE DEEPER ISSUES BEFORE LIFE DEALS THEM THOSE LIFE-BOMBS WE ALL GET—BUT WHEN THEY COME, THEY COME SO POWERFULLY WE DON'T HAVE TIME TO REALLY THINK ABOUT THEM.

5) Your descriptions are poetic and transcendent. They are some of the most powerful in modern literature.

THANK YOU. I TAKE A LOT OF TIME AND CARE TO FIND NEW LANGUAGE TO DESCRIBE THINGS IN MY WORK, NOT USE PRE-CHEWED PHRASES AND COMBINATIONS OF WORDS. KILL THE CLICHÉ!

In addition to your writing, do you pursue other creative endeavors like visual art, because the way you see things is unique, attune to the aesthetic, and extraordinary in its lasting images...

THANK YOU! YES, I THINK WE'RE FED BY ALL THE ARTS, AND SOMETIMES, AS A WRITER, I GET MORE OUT OF A CONCERT OR A MUSEUM VISIT THAN I MIGHT BY READING A NOVEL—IT STIMULATES A LESS WORKED AREA OF THE

NOVEL" IT STIMULATES A LESS WORKED AREA OF THE BRAIN I THINK. ALL THE ARTS FEED THE CREATIVE MIND. I DRAW AND PAINT AND MAKE PRINTS... BUT MOSTLY I LOVE SEEING WHAT OTHER CREATIVE PEOPLE ARE DOING.

6) The three dimensional characters you create are so easy for the reader to slip down comfortably inside of whether they are just like or nothing like them. It seems as though you know their souls. How would you describe the process of the formation of these characters with the brush strokes of your pen?

CHARACTERS COME TO ME FIRST THROUGH THEIR VOICES, NORMALLY. I HEAR THEM BEFORE I SEE THEM, BEFORE I KNOW THEM. PROTAGONISTS ALWAYS TAKE LONGER THAN ANYONE ELSE, BECAUSE YOU SEE THE WORLD THROUGH THEM— IT TAKES AWHILE TO BE ABLE TO TURN THE CAMERA AROUND. BUT MOST OF MY CHARACTERS ARE PARTS OF MYSELF, "PIECED OUT" -- SO ONE CHARACTER HAS THESE TRAITS AND ANOTHER HAS A DIFFERENT SET. LIKE A DREAM IN WHICH EVERY FIGURE IS YOU, A PART OF YOU, WORKING ITSELF OUT AGAINST ANOTHER PART. WITH BITS AND FRAGMENTS OF OTHER PEOPLE THROWN IN.

7) Many creative artists in many different mediums tend to foster an inner darkness as a by-product of their imaginative, constantly creating minds much like Michael, one of the key characters from your novel *Paint it Black*. What is your advice to fellow and aspiring writers who struggle with those same standards of perfection and who also struggle with the arduous process of getting their work published?

I HAD BEEN WRITING FOR TEN YEARS BEFORE I EVER GOT ANYTHING PUBLISHED, 20 BEFORE WHITE OLEANDER. I KNOW PLENTY ABOUT THAT. IT'S THE LESSON OF PUNK ROCK—JUST MAKE A MARK. DON'T WORRY ABOUT GETTING PEOPLE'S APPROVAL. PERMISSION HAS TO ANTIDOTE PERFECTIONISM. BUT AN ARTIST IS ALWAYS BALANCING BETWEEN THE TWO. JUST DO SOMETHING AND THEN ALSO

STRIVING TO BE GREAT. TOO MUCH PERMISSION LEADS TO SLACK STUFF, TOO MUCH PERFECTIONISM AND YOU DON'T DO ANYTHING AT ALL. ITS AN UNEASY BALANCE AT BEST. AS TO THE PUBLICATION QUESTION, FOCUSING MORE ON THE QUALITY OF EVERY SENTENCE AND LESS ON THE RUSH TO GET INTO PRINT WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT CHANGE FOR ME.

How do you as a writer feed and rejuvenate your spirit even now as you achieved outstanding success?

PARTICIPATION IN THE OTHER ARTS FEEDS ME. READING STUFF THAT I DON'T NECESSARILY LIKE BUT THAT STIMULATES ME, FEEDS ME. SOMETIMES NOT BEING SO SOCIAL IS IMPORTANT, BEING MORE INWARD. PLAYING MORE, LIKE A LITTLE KID.

How do you personally find the support that sustains you on your artistic path?

I WORK WITH TWO OTHER WRITERS I TRUST AND VALUE, WE READ EACH OTHER'S STUFF WEEKLY AND GIVE GLOVES-OFF CRITIQUE. YOU'RE NEVER TOO ADVANCED TO NEED OTHER EYES.

Anything else in the pipeline in terms of new projects? I and I'm sure many others are addicted to your writing so I thought I would ask the question.

YES, I'M AT WORK ON A NEW BOOK, RIGHT NOW I'M IN Russia IN 1917. WHO KNOWS WHERE IT WILL END.

8) What exactly does the craft of writing mean to you and what do you enjoy most about the process?

THE CRAFT OF WRITING TO ME IS THE ART OF WRITING—THE MUSIC OF THE SENTENCE, BRINGING THE SENSES TO

BEAR, ALWAYS STEERING CLEAR OF ANY PRE-OWNED PHRASE, CREATING NEWLY MINTED IMAGES, NEW MINTED LANGUAGE, EVERY TIME. WHAT I ENJOY MOST—IS WHEN YOU'VE BEEN WORKING SO HARD IN A VERY CRAFTSMAN-LIKE WAY, AND SUDDENLY THE ANGELS SING. YOU FIND THE LITERARY EQUIVALENT OF A GREAT JAZZ SOLO POURING OUT OF YOU, POURING THROUGH YOU, REALLY. THAT'S WHAT I LIVE FOR.

Nancy Slonim Aronie, author of the life-line book of hope, humor, and heart for writers, *Writing from the Heart*, and founder of the beloved Chilmark Workshop on Martha's Vineyard, says that writing "keeps your hand in the fire." Well, here we are talking about keeping the fire alive, healing old wounds, and tossing the rule book out of the window with that same wonderfully talented, nurturing individual.

Questions for Nancy Slonim Aronie Interview by Nicole M. Bouchard

1) In your incredibly insightful book on writing, *Writing from the Heart*, it seems as though you prescribe the soul-baring process of writing not only for "writers" but for anyone who is willing to put pen to paper and heal. You said, "Write it and then live it." Would you say that writing is a way of living and that also the reverse is true, living, truly living, is a way of writing?

YES. I THINK YOU ARE IN YOUR STORY ALL THE TIME. THEY ARE INTERCHANGEABLE.

2) In your Chilmark Workshop on Martha's Vineyard, you stress that you help writers access their writing as opposed to teaching the craft to them and you've been compared to a midwife, only for books. What do you feel is the most important part of the process that takes place within writers during the course of the workshop?

SAFETY. WHEN PEOPLE ARE SAFE, THEY CAN GO ANYWHERE. IF YOU HAVE A SKI INSTRUCTOR WHO ENCOURAGES YOU, YOU TAKE A RISK. IF A PAINTING TEACHER IS TELLING YOU THAT YOU'RE USING THE WRONG BRUSH, ARE YOU GOING TO FEEL

YOU'RE USING THE WRONG BRUSH, ARE YOU GOING TO FEEL FLOWY AND FREE? THERE IS NO WRONG IN CREATIVE ART. ANY NEGATIVE REMARK IS GOING TO STOP YOU. MODEL A HUMAN BEING WHO SUFFERS AND LAUGHS IN THE SAME PARAGRAPH. GO DEEP. THINK, 'THIS IS WHAT TERRIFIES ME. THIS IS WHAT I LOVE.'

Do you ask participants to metaphorically leave their baggage at the door or do you invite them to take it in and open it up with the belief that those who've ever been through pain make deeper writers?

LEAVE THE CENSOR PART OF YOURSELF AT THE DOOR. AS FOR THE BAGGAGE, TAKE IT AND PUT IT ON THE PAGE. LET IT GO. PUT THIS SHIT ON THE PAPER AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO CARRY IT AROUND ANYMORE.

3) How difficult have you found it to "unteach" the constricting rules many writers learned in their school years or from the beliefs of others around them?

IT'S ALMOST IMMEDIATE. IT'S AMAZING HOW THEY [STUDENTS] THROW OUT THE TEACHER'S BULLSHIT. THE FIRST ASSIGNMENT IS SO PROVOCATIVE, THEY STEP UP TO THE CHALLENGE. THE ONLY HARD PART IS FOR THEM TO TRULY BELIEVE THAT THE PIECE THEY WROTE IS GREAT. IT TAKES THEM A LONG TIME TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THEY HAVE A GIFT. THEY LEAVE THE WORKSHOP FEELING CHARGED AND INSPIRED. IT'S A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT, IT ISN'T PHONY, AND WHEN YOU'RE WRITING IS RAW AND REAL, IT'S GOOD.

4) Is there a favorite anecdote about a student who you helped to allow themselves to truly open up and write?

THIS WAS LAST SUMMER . THE ASSIGNMENT WAS TO WRITE ABOUT A TIME YOU WEREN'T INVITED. A WOMAN SPOKE UP AND SAID THAT SHE HAD THE OPPOSITE PROBLEM. SHE WAS INVITED TO EVERYTHING AND HATED IT ALL. SHE ASKED IF SHE COULD WRITE ABOUT A TIME SHE DIDN'T INVITE

SOMEONE. I TOLD HER SHE COULD. SHE WAS STOIC, OFTEN SEEMINGLY UNMOVED AS OTHERS READ AND CRIED OVER THEIR WORK.

SHE WROTE ABOUT A CHILDHOOD BEST FRIEND WHO WAS A NEIGHBOR, TWO YEARS OLDER THAN SHE WAS. THEY TALKED WELL INTO THE NIGHT ABOUT THE THINGS THAT BEST FRIENDS DREAM OF- WEDDINGS, NAMING THEIR FUTURE CHILDREN, BEING THE MAIDS OF HONOR AT EACH OTHER'S CEREMONIES. IN CONTRAST TO HER AFFLUENT, HEALTH FOOD CONSCIOUS LIFE, HER FRIEND LIVED IN A BLUE COLLAR HOUSEHOLD WHERE THE ATMOSPHERE WAS MORE RELAXED. SHE ALWAYS HAD FUN AT HER FRIEND'S HOUSE.

LATER, WHEN SHE CAME HOME FROM COLLEGE AND HER FRIEND HAD GONE TO ACCOUNTING SCHOOL, SHE AND HER FRIEND SEEMED DISCONNECTED WITH LITTLE IN COMMON. THE LOVE WAS STILL THERE, BUT THINGS WERE DIFFERENT WHEN THEY WERE YOUNG. SHE INVITED HER CHILDHOOD FRIEND TO MEET HER COLLEGE FRIENDS. THEY JUDGED THE YOUNG WOMAN WITH THE BLUE EYE SHADOW AND MINI SKIRT. FALLING INTO THE OPINION OF HER COLLEGE FRIENDS, THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE WOMAN AND HER CHILDHOOD FRIEND WIDENED.

ON HER WEDDING DAY, SHE STOOD IN HER GOWN NEXT TO HER FATHER. HER CHILDHOOD FRIEND CAME INTO THE CHURCH LATE WITH WEEPY EYES.

THE WOMAN DEEPLY REGRETTED HER CHOICE OF NOT INCLUDING HER OLD FRIEND IN THE WEDDING PARTY.

WE ALL ASKED IF SHE AND HER FRIEND WERE STILL IN TOUCH. THEY WEREN'T. WE ENCOURAGED HER TO GOOGLE HER OLD FRIEND. FINALLY, SHE FOUND HER. THEY TALKED FOR TWO HOURS. THE FRIEND EXPLAINED THAT SHE WAS NEVER ANGRY ABOUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED. THEY DROVE

FOR THREE HOURS TO MEET EACH OTHER AND STILL STAY IN TOUCH.

ANOTHER ANECDOTE IS FROM A WINTER SESSION OF THE WORKSHOP. THE CLASS WAS OVER. IT HAD BEEN TEN TUESDAY NIGHTS. ONE OF THE PARTICIPANTS WAS THE FORMER PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT'S GRAND-DAUGHTER, LAURA. A STUDENT APPROACHED HER WITH A STORY. THIS WOMAN HAD GRANDPARENTS WHO WERE EASTERN EUROPEAN JEWISH AND HER MOTHER WOULD READ THE NEWSPAPER TO THEM. THE MOTHER HAD AN ILLNESS CAUSED BY A VITAMIN DEFICIENCY. THE MOTHER, AT NINE YEARS OLD, READ IN THE PAPER THAT ELEANOR ROOSEVELT WAS OFFERING MEDICAL ASSISTANCE TO THOSE IN NEED OF IT. SHE WROTE A LETTER TO ELEANOR AND A LIMOUSINE SHOWED UP FOR HER MOTHER TO TAKE HER TO ST. VINCENT'S HOSPITAL. THE MOTHER WAS CURED OF HER AFFLICTION. THEY STAYED IN TOUCH.

LATER IN LIFE, THE GIRL WHO HAD WRITTEN THE LETTER FOUND HERSELF STUCK IN A MARRIAGE WITH A MAN WHO HAD LANDED HIMSELF IN JAIL. VERY MUCH IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE ELSE, SHE WROTE TO ELEANOR AGAIN. THE MARRIAGE WAS UNDONE, AND OUT OF THE HAPPY UNION THAT THE GIRL WAS ABLE TO MAKE, CAME THE GRAND-DAUGHTER IN THE WORKSHOP.

Did the openness in their writing spread into their lives via positive manifestation or emotional healing? Do you believe that words can affect and shape our lives in a spiritual sense?

ABSOLUTELY. WHOLE LIVES CHANGE. MARRIED PEOPLE GO HOME TO THEIR SPOUSES ABLE TO TRULY TALK TO THEM. BEHAVIOR CHANGES BECAUSE THERE ARE NO MORE ANGLES. MAJOR LIFE TRANSFORMATIONS ARE ABLE TO TAKE PLACE. THERE IS COMPLETE CLARITY. INSTEAD OF GOING TO A SHRINK, NINE OUT OF TEN PEOPLE SAY THAT THEY

POWERFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR HUMANITY THROUGH WRITING. SOMETIMES THEY RETURN NUMEROUS TIMES TO THE COMFORTABLE ATMOSPHERE OF THE WORKSHOP AFTER HAVING BEEN OUT IN THE DIFFICULT WORLD FOR AWHILE.

5) How do you encourage writers to go outside their comfort zone and outside the realm of acceptable truths into just plain raw truth?

IF NOT IN THE FIRST EXERCISE, THEN THEY DO THE SECOND TIME AROUND. THEY DON'T WANT TO TAKE THIS WORKSHOP AND BE A BULLSHITTER, BECAUSE THEN THEY WOULDN'T GET THE HEALING BENEFIT OF WRITING THEIR TRUTH.

How do you guide them if they aren't getting down to the bare essentials of their story whether it is fiction or non-fiction?

I DON'T. THEY FIND THEIR OWN WAY THROUGH THE FEEDBACK OF OTHER PARTICIPANTS. THEY THINK TO THEMSELVES, 'WOW. I WROTE A GREAT F#$%ING LINE!' THEY LOOK OVER THEIR WORK AND LEARN TO BE KIND EDITORS TO THEMSELVES. IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE NICE TO YOURSELF ABOUT YOUR WRITING. A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE BATTERED IN SCHOOL AND THEY'VE SIMPLY LEARNED TO BE TOO TOUGH ON THEMSELVES.

6) And finally, how do your diverse experiences help to add to your teaching process?

I HAVE A LOT OF SPIRITUAL TEACHERS. I LISTEN TO THEIR TAPES IN THE CAR ALL THE TIME. I AM ABLE TO SEE HOW LIFE IS SUPERFICIAL, ONLY A COVER, AND UNDERNEATH IS A BEAUTIFUL SOUL THAT CAN NEVER DO WRONG. MY ADVICE IS TO HAVE FUN, EAT RIGHT, DON'T TAKE LIFE TOO SERIOUSLY, GO INTO THE WOODS AND PLAY. DON'T BE FEARFUL, BECAUSE AN UNDERLYING FEAR IS WHAT PREVENTS MOST PEOPLE FROM DOING SO MANY THINGS IN THEIR LIVES.

*Here we would like to thank both 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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