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Come in...and be captivated...



Floral #7 by Jim Fuess; www.jimfuessart.com

In this issue we interview Alexandra Stoddard. With over twenty-seven books, this celebrated interior designer is also a lifestyle philosopher. Being a literary magazine, we wanted to talk to her about the art of writing as well as the kind of room in which one writes great thoughts!

She is a very strong-willed, brilliant woman who between the lines, told me to just sit down and write. (More on that thought in Writers' Tool Box)

In her new book, Things Good Mothers Know: A Celebration , one might think it another tome on selflessness. Instead, it is a refreshing and uplifting book on celebrating and taking care of yourself in order to fill the well so that you can continue to care for those you love.

She gave me a bit of tough love and it was the best advice I could've received at this time in my life. We hope it will get you writing as well or at least to begin creating a space of your own.

We now give you the no-nonsense, Ms. Alexandra Stoddard...

Interview and questions by Denise Bouchard

1) In Victoria Magazine, you write of having a “Room of One’s Own”. That piece truly resonated with me as I’m sure it did with other writers and I thank you for sharing the space’s beauty with us. I was entranced with the style of the room... The French farmhouse table and the armoires filled with organized fabric-covered boxes and the drawers filled with colorful Waterman inks, the view of your garden with entreating seasonable breezes off of the harbor... (If only we all had such a writing room!) Can you talk to us about designing an efficient creative work space (what your new writing room looks like as it is being remodeled)?

Most importantly, I want you to envision the room. The white paint to reflect the light as I’m always seeking more light in my soul and surroundings, the simplicity of having little furniture in the space other than my desk, no chaos, the beautiful wide plank 18th century floors... On top of my desk there is a vase of flowers- Nikko blue hydrangeas, daffodils, and purple tulips. I meditate with a flower before I begin writing. With the remodeling of the room, you can’t really see the changes as they consisted of things such as replacing the windows and really

preserving what was already there. I did, however, treat myself to a research center; a cabinet with eight drawers which hold twenty-thousand index cards each. The index cards I use are 4x6, from Paris, and they have quotes from individuals such as Aristotle, Plato, and Ralph Waldo Emerson on them. Beneath the drawers are shelves for the books I'm currently working on. I feel blessed to have such a warm, inviting room that is mine and only mine; it's a sanctuary. That is the kind of space that a writer, that anyone, should have. A space of your own where there is no one waiting for you, no one to undermine you and you know that your papers aren't going to be accidentally blown out of the window. It is a place of self. No bills or to-do lists have a place in this room. It is a retreat. You like to choose a room with a view, but the focal point of your attentions should be your work, your personal craft. (I look at my desk when I write and then I'm in my pages. Right now I'm in ancient Greece 2,500 years ago.) From there, design a work space with your resources and complete simplicity in mind.

2) Also, it is a known fact that there are two kinds of writers: those who work and write neatly in flow and the others who work on a mountainous mess. Though my home is lovely, my manuscript is the latter. What are your methods of organization and how does one avoid having a daunting manuscript that's ten feet high (not having twenty page 1's and so on)?

I write in sessions, normally three different sessions, and I take breaks in between; it could be something as simple as taking a walk to refresh me. When I return to my desk, I can pick up where I left off whether in the middle of a sentence, a paragraph, or a page. This helps me to never have writer's block because when I return after a break, I'm always completing a thought.

3) In the spirit of Valentine's Day, I want to discuss with you the joy of working alongside your husband. It must give you a great deal to talk about when you break for dinner. What qualities come to mind when you think of a 'good marriage'? In your book, *Happiness for Two: 75 Secrets for*

a good marriage. In your book, Happiness for Dummies, you discuss your book, Finding More Joy Together, you draw upon the wisdom of certain quotes. What is one of your favorite quotes on love? Additionally, what did you tell your daughters to look for in a spouse?

I think of Peter as my other half, he completes me. We each have our own writing rooms, solitude for two, and then we take the time to have a break. It's fun to know that we've been growing closer and closer over the course of thirty-five years, reading, writing, and discussing it afterwards. You literally become the company you keep. There is never a dull moment. I'm writing the forward of his new book. We share ourselves. The qualities that come to mind when thinking of a good union are the same qualities I'd look for in anyone: superior character, kind, tender, loving, listens well, good eye contact, and sensitivity to other's needs. Through our intimacy in communication, we reach a high level of rapport; that becomes rhapsody in an intellectual and spiritual way. There are no egos, no rush to do anything. In regard to a favorite quote on love... to me, there is no one answer. Love is what is beautiful, noble and true. I don't imagine that one quote would be broad enough to cover it all. I live for love... love is an aphrodisiac... that which binds, synergy, sensitivity for self and reaching out to other people. To love beautifully, you must learn to love yourself with your whole heart, knowing why you're here on earth. You have to have your dignity and self-awareness. Aristotle feels that it is essential to love yourself. It is then something you can give to others to make their lives rich, full and complete. As a mother, I never did say anything to my daughters on what to look for in a spouse. I tried instead to teach by example. They knew they had to find great happiness without someone else. They had to have 24/7 self love. Both married later in life for the right things- love, inspiration, and companionship.

4) Talk to us about your latest book, *Things Good Mothers Know: A Celebration*, and its inspiration. As a mother, it sounds interesting to me. Even though my daughter is now grown, the job of mothering continues as

long as you live. What, as Oprah would say, “do you know for sure” that we need to be mindful of for our children?

Being a mother is a celebration of who you are. The only way to do it is to be a happy person, take care of yourself, and do what you want to do. An unhappy mother can yield a guilty child. If you are to take care of another human being, you have to know how to care for yourself. Motherhood is a powerful force for good or bad. I study happiness internationally and what I’ve found is that mothers who find their happiness project that onto their children. Additionally, it’s important for children to learn how to think for themselves, be prepared, learn personal responsibility and how to be accountable. For example, while working with a child is important, their work cannot be done for them. Children need to feel their own successes.

5) What are you reading right now? Who are some of your favorite inspirational gurus? And whose philosophies do you hold in particular esteem for the art of writing?

Right now I’m re-reading *The Dream of Reason* by Anthony Gottlieb, which covers the history of philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance. Aristotle is a favorite inspirational figure. He has so much to teach us today; his lessons can be applied to the current, modern world... moderation and balance. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, Emerson, Michel Montaigne- a 16th century French essayist, are among my favorite gurus on happiness. The depth of my plodding makes work fun because I’m always challenging myself. I think people are only skimming the surface- we want less of ourselves. It’s my humble thought that someone can get more out of attending a lecture than going to the gym. In answer to whose philosophies I hold in particular esteem, I’d say Aristotle on that one. He didn’t limit his knowledge to what his teacher, Plato, taught him. He was grounded and took notes. It’s his process that I admire. He distills everything he’s learned from his predecessors, ancient

wise men, philosophers and then shows how his perspective might differ and why he feels this way, thus arriving at his own conclusion. You have to ask full questions to get the truth of life, to make you free. I don't choose his prose, which was flowery, but even through the translations, centuries and different languages, his work still resonates. Pages should sing and dance. I read only non-fiction now with the purpose of learning.

6) In your book, *You are Your Choices: 50 Ways to Live the Good Life*, you talk about walking away from negative people. But...what if you can't walk away, at least in an immediate sense? For example- you buy the dream house but are surrounded by mean-spirited neighbors?

My mentor, Eleanor McMillen Brown, said you can't control your environment. You don't have to spend time with negative people. Avoid them and be totally engaged in your life. I think that ignoring someone is the ultimate insult- an efficient way of dealing with negative individuals.

7) Though writers are traditionally isolated, do you feel that writers are a community unto themselves and thus joined together by our mutual interests, mindsets and inspirations? When I walk through certain neighborhoods of past writers, I can feel their inspiration ingrained in the old buildings and knowing that current local writers are writing in their lofts, it makes me feel less isolated.

I feel people's energy. If I walk into Emily Dickinson's house, I can feel that writer energy. I love being around writers, but I can feel that same feeling just by reading their works. I give talks and lectures and that environment is stimulating. As the sun is setting here, casting fiery pink glows and lavender shadows, and I know that there are so many creative people here who are working in their houses, bettering the world through their work, I find that I'm not really isolated.

8) I always thought you possessed a scintillating pulchritude. Lately, in my own life at fifty-something, there are days when I wonder where the vivacious girl of my youth is. So tell me, how does one enter the next phase gracefully, embracing its delights and hardships?

It's in the little things of everyday. For me, happiness is embedded in my DNA so I see life getting better at this stage because we're wiser. It's a time for a woman to enrich her own soul. It takes a tremendous amount of discipline to be happy. Personally, I can't understand how someone could have a bad year or even a bad hour; there's always something to take in and be grateful for. I'm always writing, working on my craft and that helps. A friend of mine says that when she stops baking, she knows she's in trouble. You have to do what you love and be kind to yourself.

9) Can you say a few words on procrastination? An interviewer once asked you if it was painful to write. You responded that it was painful not to write. Many of us are caught in webs of everyday life and the constant stream of *I should's* or *have to's*. What are your words of wisdom on making the time to commune with our art and actually settling down to do it?

Most people are perfectionists about the wrong things. Do your work (your chosen work) first. Then everything, even folding the clothes, is suddenly easier and you don't notice the effort you have to put into daily tasks when you've put in a good day's work.

10) In the book, *Daring to be Yourself*, you talk of asking lots of questions to bring out one's innate style. I used to use a similar process in the cosmetic industry when I had my own promotional agency for the same purpose. Estee Lauder once said that if she hadn't gone into the cosmetics industry, she would have gone into interior decorating. Because it's all about color and style, I can see how the fields are closely related. What other fields, related or otherwise, would you have enjoyed dabbling in if you

hadn't gone into interior decorating and writing?

Though I have a gift for working with flowers and nature is very important to me, I believe that I'm perfectly suited to what I do. No regrets. I know that I wouldn't choose any other thing. As an interior designer, I had good roots for writing. As a child, I would write letters to my friends for almost any purpose... like their dog's paw had been injured, for instance. The work that I do is a part of my destiny and purpose.

For more information, visit www.alexandrastoddard.com

In celebration of children's literature, we are featuring an interview this issue with Random House's Michelle Poploff, V.P. Editorial Director of Bantam Delacorte Dell Books for Young Readers

Interview and questions by: Nicole M. Bouchard

1) What initially drew you to your profession? How do you feel your own experiences with books as a child influence your philosophies of quality children's literature today? In our winter issue, we mention in the Writers' Craft Box section the importance of re-visiting our roots in terms of delving back into our childhood imaginations through whimsical books such as *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie and *The Children of Green Knowe* by L.M. Boston, to not only refresh our wonderment perspective, but to learn from the elegant descriptive prose of such authors. What were your childhood favorites and why?

In terms of my chosen work [profession], my father was in publishing and my mother worked at a library. Growing up in the 60's, I was always surrounded by books. I was a voracious reader and I also enjoyed writing short stories. A favorite childhood book of mine was *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase (The Wolves Chronicles)* by Joan Aiken. In those days, it never occurred to me to write to an author, so it was an unexpected thrill to get to work with Joan Aiken several decades later. Other childhood favorites of

mine include *Understood Betsy* by Dorothy Canfield Fisher , and *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. I also enjoyed mysteries. The books that I take pleasure in reading and publish, often take place in far-off settings during different time periods. I favor protagonists who make things happen instead of letting life happen to them... overcoming difficult circumstances.

2) As Vice President of Children's Books for Random House, do you feel that the current trend toward beginner and read-aloud stories with illustrations is due in part to the increase in demographics of 4 to 6 year old audiences linked to the very involved Baby Boomer generation grandparents? (A trend observed on the Barnes & Noble website this past year)

Though beginner books and read-aloud stories aren't my specific area, there is certainly encouragement from adults toward this trend as opposed to children being stimulated only by TV and computers. The children of this generation, having more information and resources at their fingertips, are certainly ahead of the curve.

{Parents who are interested in the fine learning tools available through Step into Reading can check out <http://www.randomhouse.com/kids/books/step/parents/index.html> for more information}

3) In projections for the children's book market for 2010, the role of the internet, being more involved in family life than ever before, is being taken into consideration. How do you feel this will factor into young readerships and their literary education?

The presence and role of the internet will continue to affect children's entertainment and education. There are books online, and children can download many books for school and vacation reading. However, it's still a different and pleasurable experience to turn the pages of a book. I believe there will always be a place for books both in bookstores and in libraries.

4) What market between historical children's fiction (*American Girl* series)

4) What market, between historical children's fiction (American Girl series), fantasy (Harry Potter, Narnia, Eragon) and educational (ethnic/language/adventure books such as Dora the Explorer) do you think will see a surge in the coming year?

That's difficult to say, however, I would venture to think that the books which speak to the contemporary readers and their issues will retain popularity. Children like to read about themselves- books that reflect what they're going through. Years ago, divorce-themed books helped children understand something that was considered unusual at the time. Classic historical books will continue to thrive in schools and libraries. The fantasy genre draws both children as well as adults and ethnic, bi-racial, multi-cultural books speak to modern times.

5) The age-old question: How does one write a compelling query? Literary agencies and specialized books on writing often have contradictory advice, so what are some universal principles?

Getting involved in or referring to the SCBWI, (Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators) is helpful and provides resources. As a writer, try to come up with a concept-specific vision for your story. Develop a three sentence elevator pitch. Many people might say that their book is the next Harry Potter. If you are going to refer to a current popular book/series such as *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, then distinguish and establish how your work is similar or dissimilar. You must study the market, just as though you were studying for a test. There is always a different way to tell a story, even if you are dealing with the alphabet or a story about numbers. Don't send unsolicited manuscripts. I also encourage writers to own their family history and draw upon it for inspiration.

6) In educating children of this constantly changing generation, not only intellectually, but ethically as well, what do you feel are the important themes that children's literature should instill to shape character and identity in a young mind? Are there certain classics/fables/fairy tales that you feel should be timelessly referred to? If so, what are the top five (in your opinion)?

Our hope is to get kids to read; to view reading as entertainment. Kid's lives are booked today with various activities. Graphic novels are becoming popular and other books that children might flock to are those that depict resourceful children as protagonists, going against the grain, outwitting negative circumstances, discovering their power, combating prejudice, and those who make their way as opposed to having everything given to them from the start. Classics-good Americana includes Mark Twain's *Huck Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, Robert Cormier's, *The Chocolate War* and Judy Blume's, *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*.

7) What are some of the key ingredients in a children's story that have the ability to enchant you as an adult while searching out the best books for young readers?

A book can happen at any place or time. The essential part is the character- one you can be with, believe in, and share in their triumph. It has to be hard for the reader to turn that last page.

8) Given the current economic environment, do you anticipate a resurgence of interest in reading as parents and children turn to (return to) less costly forms of entertainment and a greater emphasis on using one's imagination vs. relying on external stimuli?

I hope so , but I don't know for certain what will happen. Library programs and read-aloud sessions certainly inspire kids and families to use library resources.

Ms. Poploff has recently edited Newbery Honor winner, *Hattie Big Sky* by Kirby Larson as well as Sundee T. Frazier's *Brendan Buckley's World and Everything In It* which received the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe New Talent Award.

*Here we would like to thank featured past and present authors for permitting

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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