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Begin With Curiosity: Q & A with Lynn Sloan

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by Jan English Leary

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Lynn Sloan and I have known each other for more than twenty years, first as members of writing workshops, and lately in a small critique group. We have a rich, collaborative friendship, and we've also both been fortunate to have our books published by Fomite Press of Vermont, run by **Marc Estrin** and **Donna Bister**. *Principles of Navigation* (<https://www.indiebound.org/book/9781937677930?aff=bloom-site>), Lynn's first novel, came out in 2015, and her story collection, *This Far Isn't Far Enough* (<https://www.indiebound.org/book/9781944388294?aff=bloom-site>), appeared recently. The fourteen stories included in this collection were written over a period of several years, and they are gems—each one unique, but universal in their truth. My admiration for her writing—the psychological complexity, the beautiful language, the compelling, diverse situations—continues to grow and deepen. Even though we've been reading each other's manuscripts for years, many of the stories in Lynn's collection are new to me. It was a pleasure to ask my old friend questions that I hadn't asked before.

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Jan English Leary: The title of your collection *This Far Isn't Far Enough* comes from a sentence in your story "Nature Rules." "She had come this far to get away and it wasn't far enough." What made you choose this title, and are there any implications in this idea for your characters and your writing?

(<https://www.indiebound.org/book/9781944388294?aff=bloom-site>) **Lynn Sloan:** *This Far Isn't Far Enough* is not my first title. My first was so bad that I won't tell you what it was, or the other terrible titles I considered. The title of your story collection, *Skating on the Vertical*, that's a great title. It's the title of one of your stories, and also the has power to draw in us readers, suggesting a wild daring we can feel, and the impossibility of the act. The impossible edge exists in all your stories. None of my story titles could act as an umbrella for the whole. Marc Estrin commented that in my stories the character's past returns in some way and alters the present. Using that observation as a starting point, I re-read my stories from the back of the galleys to the front, backward reading prevented me from getting swept up in the flow, and when I found that line you mention, I liked it immediately. So did Marc.



JEL: You are a photographer and you taught photography for years. Not surprisingly, your stories in *This Far Isn't Far Enough* are firmly grounded in vivid visual imagery. Do your stories start with a visual image that anchors the setting, or do your characters lead you to the visual details?

LS: Jan, well done. You've asked a question that proves that logic doesn't always hold. I am a photographer, I love the visual surface of the world, but ironically, my stories seldom start with a visual image. I turned to fiction writing because I wanted to dive beneath what we can see, to delve into what drives us, our feelings, our yearnings and desires, our fears and our revulsions, the whole thicket of our emotions. When I first began to write stories, I followed the advice offered by many: start with an image, and I did. These efforts always fizzled. I have no idea why. My stories begin in curiosity. Something that I find odd snags my attention and then doesn't let go. Like: why is that old man wiping that old woman's drooling mouth with such care in his touch and such anger on his face? This was on the train. The two of them were sitting across the aisle. Several possible explanations came to me, all of them trivial and uninteresting. A few days later I had lunch with an actor friend, who spoke of the career trajectories of those in her repertory group. As we talked about talent, determination, luck good and bad, the usual, my mind went back to the old couple I'd seen on the train. In my imagination they had become actors, she the successful one, he the one who had sacrificed his career to support hers, and now she has dementia. How would that sit with the old man, who in my imagination had taken on the name Eugene? And what happens then? Puzzling over one question after another led to my story "Call Back." All my stories grow from questions raised by what might seem like random events: overheard snippets of conversations, or a strange smell—once, machine oil coming from my dead cousin's lingerie drawer—or things I see, like the couple on the train. But nothing is actually random. What pricks my curiosity out of the countless things I encounter, the same as for you, reveals what I care about as a story writer.

My stories don't begin with the visual, but I do love the look of our material world. I revel in it, in fact. For me as a writer, this is a blessing and a curse. I can conjure up lots of visual details—this is handy—but it's a curse, too. I can take a paragraph to describe how a motel bedspread moves under a lovemaking couple, or the interior of a cup ringed with tea stains, or a lit cigarette's glowing embers, etc. etc. *yawn*. In revision, I cut like crazy. Seeing my characters and the places they inhabit makes the made-up world real for me, and this helps me build a credible world.

JEL: You have published a novel, short stories, and flash fiction. Do you typically know at the outset whether it's going to be a story or a novel? Is it possible to decide on a shape for a piece or does material dictate its own length?

(<https://www.indiebound.org/book/9781937677930?aff=bloom-site>)**LS:** My novel, *Principles of Navigation*, came out in 2015, and during the time I was working on it, I also wrote stories, the ones included in my new collection and a few others. Counting two miserable novels I've stored in cardboard boxes waiting for my town's next bonfire, I've written three novels. So, I've had more experience with novel-writing than one published novel would suggest. What I've learned when novel-writing is to take a break after finishing each complete draft and write a story. This gives me the psychic distance I need to understand what the long work needs, and the change of pace is also what I need after my long slough in the private world of my novel. For me, stories and novel seem quite different, and what I bring to them is quite different. With a novel, I embrace its expansiveness. Stories are compact; how compact depends on the length I find to be right. With stories of all lengths, I like to see how much I can compress into each one. With flash stories, I compress all the elements, then I strip away until what is left is rock hard.



To your question: do I know at the outset whether I'm embarking on a story, a flash story, or a novel? I do. Right from the start I know what form my initiating idea will take. If I'm thinking about an entire social landscape, a time period with major forces at play, and more than a few characters, then I've got a novel in the works. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the flash story. With these, I start with an incident and a small cast of characters, and I condense. I've written a dozen or so flash stories. These stories act like a sip of brandy: potent, layered in nuance, no before and no after. If what intrigues me starts with the simple question "why," I know I'm beginning a story. It will be a moment in a life, or several characters' lives, a moment that has tendrils in the past and implications about the future, and it will focus on a few intense elements. With short stories, I weave several strands together, three or four, but the number of characters will be few and the time period will be limited. In *This Far Isn't Far Enough* the stories cover time periods as short as one evening and as long as a year.

JEL: The titles of your stories often resonate on two levels. "Safe," "Nature Rules," "Call Back" are examples. Are you aware of these double meanings at the outset? Or are they part of the discovery?

LS: You've just asked a question that reveals something I hadn't realized. Wow. I would add "Ollie's Back" to this list. It, too, can be interpreted in different ways, all of them relevant to the story. It was for this reason that I chose "Ollie's Back" for my story about a down-on-his-luck Lowcountry cook determined to make a comeback. Comeback, past comes back, monkey on his back, all kinds of relevant associations. I like titles that resonate with several meanings, but I hadn't realized until you raised it that I've used them often.

Titling stories is fun, and not nearly as hard as was finding the right title for my collection. Titles usually act like signposts, telling the reader what the story is about or where it's headed. For writers who are lucky enough to find a title before they begin writing, the title can serve as a handy signpost too, keeping the story on track, I suppose, although I've never had a title for a story before the story was written and I've typed THE END. I would like to see how that works, having a title in advance. I keep a journal that's filled with amazing titles, but they never seem to fit! Over the years that I've been writing stories, I've come to expect my titles to do more and more work. If I can find a title that can be interpreted differently after the reader has read the story, then I'm happy. If I can find a title that resonates on several levels, then I'm really happy.

JEL: What is ahead for you and your work?

LS: I'm working on two entirely different projects. I mentioned that I've written flash stories. A group of them involve fortune cookie fortunes in some way. I'm working with an extremely talented book designer, **Craig Jobson**, of Lark Sparrow Press, on a limited-edition book titled *Fortune Cookies* that includes seven of these stories. Lark Sparrow Press's books are collector's items, and Craig is a real artist. To engage in the production of this book with Craig, considering all the visual elements that go into a fine press book, is, in a way, a return to my days as fine artist. And I'm writing a new novel. All I can say about it is that it's a work-in-progress, but as I approach the end of this first draft, I understand, finally, the story I'm going to tell.



Jan English Leary is the author of two books: a novel, Thicker Than Blood (<https://www.indiebound.org/book/9781942515128>). (Fomite 2015), and a collection of short stories, Skating on the Vertical (<https://www.indiebound.org/book/9781944388249>). (Fomite 2017). Her fiction has been published in Pleiades, Carve, The Minnesota Review, The Literary Review, and other journals. She lives in Chicago with her husband.

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