

This Far Isn't Far Enough: An Interview with Lynn Sloan

03/09/18

We met at a faculty retreat, Lynn Sloan and I, quite a number of years ago. Lynn taught photography at Columbia College Chicago, where I teach creative writing, and I still remember her speaking about the potential for narrative in series of photographs. (I wonder if she really did talk about that, or if I have revised that memory in order to encapsulate both her evocative photographic images and her deeply engaging fiction?) Our paths cross often in Chicago, this remarkable literary city, and each time we meet, I am reminded of her kindness and curiosity, two traits a writer of any merit should have, I think.

We had the chance to talk story a bit, on the eve of the release of Lynn's new short story collection, [*This Far Isn't Far Enough*](#) from Fomite Press. These stories—full of “powerful yearning” (her phrase, not mine, although I wish I could claim it)—are so smart and so masterfully crafted, it was delight to hear her talk about how they came to be.

*

Patty McNair: Your stories are populated with characters we readers feel we might know. They could be our neighbors, our colleagues, a friend of our mother, a customer, a family member. These are people engaged in the daily business of their lives, but often at a moment when a choice must be made, an action taken. And therein blooms the drama. I wonder, Lynn, what comes first for you? Character or dramatic moment?

Lynn Sloan: I suppose that it's dramatic moment, in this sense: what comes first for me is a question: Why? I overhear a conversation, I encounter a situation, I read an item in the news, and I wonder, Why? Or, What's behind this? For example, “Ollie's Back,” the first story in my collection, *This Far Isn't Far Enough*, started with a feature story in the paper about a food critic who'd amassed a vast cookbook library, and who hosted a series of dinner parties, cooking from those books. Afterward he insisted that his guests take home armloads of books until finally his library shelves were bare. Why? The article said he was moving to a smaller apartment. That didn't explain it for me. Naturally I came up with lots of possible reasons, all of them springing from his desire to move away from his past. Someone connected with food wanting to move away from his past, that was the

beginning of “Ollie’s Back.” Ollie, my protagonist cook, does give away much of what he owns, but this gesture is connected to his future, not his past. Where I start when I start a story is seldom where I end up.

McNair: How do you find these characters? What sparks their existence for you at the writing desk?

Sloan: I like to write about characters who, in life, would be easy to overlook, those who are neither successes nor exquisite failures, people on the periphery of the middle. The lonely mother of a disabled son who can’t get a date in “Grow Animals,” the aging actor who plays second fiddle to his famous actor wife in “Call Back,” the old woman who feels imprisoned in the retirement home, the feminist in “The Collaborator,” who is regarded as a tedious bore—she might look different in this #MeToo era—these characters engage me. I make them up. My secondary characters are sometimes based on people I know, but my protagonists start with an idea, then, as I write, whoosh, they become round and full, the way those little capsules, grow animals, dropped in water, become something else.

McNair: While these stories are not linked in ways that some collections are—no recurring characters or obvious settings repeated—there do seem to be certain emotions that connect them. Your characters face loss and longing, a certain kind of aching love, regret. And the tug of these emotions often leads your characters to a desire for escape, a desire that they give in to in a whole variety of ways. I wonder if you were aware of these emotional threads that run through the stories, or if they emerged as you wrote them, as you collected them, as you considered which of your many stories should be part of this collection, which should be left out?

Sloan: Joan Didion said, “I don’t know what I think until I write it down.” Me too. After I’d written and published a few stories, I looked back and discovered that no matter what I thought I was writing about, it all came back to yearning. I thought I was exploring very different characters and situations, men and women, young and old, clever and not-so-smart, sophisticated and earthy, and yet, what is central is their powerful yearning, their unmet desires. My editor at Fomite, Marc Estrin, a brilliant writer and editor, remarked that all my stories revolve around the character failing to outrun their pasts. He’s right, although I hadn’t seen it that way. You say, and you’re right, that my stories are about seeking to escape. But for me, the thread is one of yearning.

McNair: One of the things that I particularly admire in these stories is that your characters are not young. Don’t get me wrong, I am a huge fan of the young protagonist, my stories are full of teenagers. I think that might be—for me—because there is a certain ease in creating characters who face moments of change, and teenagers are ripe for it. In this collection, your characters are often on the threshold of something, and you masterfully allow them to face this with a depth of knowledge and experience, and yet—each story feels as though your characters are discovering something entirely new. This collection put me in mind of some of Tessa Hadley’s short stories, and of Roddy Doyle’s collection *Bullfighting*. Stories that are a kind of “coming of middle-age.” Why do you think you are drawn to this life stage in these stories?

Sloan: What a smart observation! I hadn’t realized this. I have written a few stories about children and teenagers, but they are all flash pieces. I wonder why. You’ve given me something to think about, maybe you’ve even given me a challenge. What I know is that I like reading about the young and I’m grateful to writers like you, who write so well about growing up, in your story collection, *The Temple of Air*, and your recent non-fiction collection, *And These Are the Good Times*. But adult life just holds my focus. When I was a kid, I had no interest in books like *The Secret Garden* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I preferred James Michener, Herman Wouk, Daphne du Maurier. My parents did not approve. I sneaked these books, and others with racy covers. Adult life is so interesting, and, it seems to me, that it’s always about coming-of-age. “Coming of age” isn’t one stage or several stages of life, it *is* life. At every age, more is demanded of us than we are prepared for. Each of my characters confronts a moment, a situation, a series of situations that are particular to the “now” of the story, and this “now” is different than previous times because the character has lived through those earlier times, and has, in fact, come to a new age.

McNair: “Safe,” a story that is rather quiet on its surface but hints at a violent history between a mother and son, depicts a brief and tense reunion between the two after a long estrangement. Karen, the mother,

says to her son Ben, “I tried to take care of you.” When I read that line, I couldn’t help but think how many of your characters in these stories could say the same thing to another character. It implies both good intentions, as well as possible missteps. There should be a question here, but I guess there isn’t a precise one. Maybe you can talk a bit about that dynamic—characters trying with one another, and characters failing. How does that help to create momentum in the narrative and/or complication in the story’s psychology?

Sloan: Failure is, I think, what drives stories. Succeeding, never failing, might be what we want in life, but in stories what we want, I want, is to fall into a world where characters are faced with troubles. I’m not interested in cataclysmic events. I don’t care about runaway trains, avalanches, murderous villains. What I want to write about is what happens when basically good people need what can’t be given or are denied what they want. Then what happens? That’s what I want to discover as a writer, and as a reader. “Safe” is story that has elicited responses that surprise me. At one reading, some of those listening argued heatedly that the mother was a bad mother, and others that the son is a sociopath. I, the person who made up these characters, couldn’t make sense of either opinion, which makes me think that this story hits some people hard in a place that hurts. It’s not a safe story.

McNair: Lynn, when we first met, I knew you as a photographer. You still are that, and I was delighted, after reading these stories, to skulk around a little on your website, see the visual art there. I was particularly attracted to the collection of photos called “Abstractions” where you have taken pictures of ordinary objects through fascinating vantage points that reduce (or perhaps elevate) the objects to shape and line. Also, there is a collection called “Carnival World,” that shows realistic images of carnival rides and attractions, but they are infused with other images that are altered in some ways, making the real and the dreamlike intermingle. To me, each of these collections remind me of things you are doing with your stories—shifting vantage points, merging the real with the imagined, the dreamed of, seeing the familiar in new ways. Does your work in photography inform your fiction writing? Do you see these creative practices as interwoven in any way? How do (did) you move from one art form to the other?

Sloan: Oh, this opens up so many angles! Photography, I love photography. I love how the world looks. I made photographs that I believe hinted at what lay beneath the surface of the world. All of what was included within the frame of the picture was held in suspension to be examined as long as necessary until it yielded its facts and its deceptions. But after a time, I wanted change and movement and time. I wanted not just this one moment depicted in the image, but the before and then the after. I wanted people doing things and feelings things. As a photographer, I was frustrated by what I couldn’t reveal. I couldn’t reveal what was underneath the visible. As a writer, I’m often frustrated that I can’t bring everything together at once.

On a practical level, I have to guard against my love of the visual. I can spend paragraphs describing the way the reflections dance on the surface of coffee. Reader alert—I cut out those paragraphs! As Elmore Leonard said, “Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.”

McNair: *This Far Isn’t Far Enough*. What a wonderful title. How did you find it; how did you choose it? What are you hoping we will understand about the collection because of it?

Sloan: I’m so glad you like it, author of *And These Are the Good Times* and *The Temple of Air*, two great titles. Titling is hard for me. My story collection was accepted for publication under a terrible title that my editor said had to go. I made long lists of titles, all of which were terrible. A friend suggested that I skim my stories for nice phrases, but I got caught up with reading. I tried again, starting from the back pages and moving forward. *This Far Isn’t Far Enough* came from near the front of the book, so I had to read backward a lot of pages before I found a title I liked. *This Far Isn’t Far Enough* says something essential about this collection: in each story, the characters believe they are free of their pasts, and they aren’t.

McNair: Let’s talk endings. You know how when you go to a classical concert, and they ask that you don’t applaud immediately after the last note has been sounded, but to wait until it entirely dies away? That is how I felt reading your endings. It wasn’t as though you used them to conclude anything, to bang a final downbeat, but instead to create a sense of resonance, a vibration that would play out long after the last note. Some of this has to do with your final sentences themselves, to the way they employ both rhythm and

breath in their syntax. Some of it has to do with the possibilities your characters understand—in these final moments—are still ahead of them. A bear may or may not be waiting in the woods and shadows outside a woman’s house. A mystery lover appears in the doorway of a lonely, exhausted mother. A mother and daughter sing what they remember of a hymn as they spread the ashes of a loved one. “Neither one of us knows the words to what comes after,” the mother says, the final note. Wow. Do you write with an ending in sight? Do you discover it along the way, polish it once you do?

Sloan: I’m going to save your comments, so that next time I’m agonizing over an ending, I can re-read your words and . . . No, bad idea. I will feel even more intensely that I’m not up to writing the ending that I want to write, the ones you are describing.

When I start a story, I don’t know where I’ll end up. About halfway through the first draft, I’ll get an idea, often an idea that I know is lame, but I aim toward it trusting that as I draw close, I will figure out what must happen. Once I’ve figured this out, figured out the facts of what happens, then I try to find the words, the rhythms, sometimes suggestions of the unspoken, that reveal these facts and also will evoke emotions. An ending must ring like a bell, the sound and its aftermath, the facts and the feelings. You described this perfectly, “after the last note has sounded” waiting for it to die away. Thank you.

McNair: This collection is your second book, the novel *Principles of Navigation* your first. Does your process for writing short form differ from what you do when you are writing long form? And do you know right away if a story wants to be short or novel-length?

Sloan: Before I begin, I do know whether I’m starting on a story or a novel. When I start with a puzzle, the question of why that I mentioned earlier, I’ve got a short story in the works. If I begin imagining a large social landscape, then I’m on to a novel. Within that large landscape, there will be lots of why questions. I’ve never had a story that wanted to go big, although I’ve seen that happen with some writer friends. With novels—I’ve got several novels in boxes that should never be opened—I begin with a vast muddle and write, toss out, write more, toss, until I discover a lean story that makes sense. This is the first draft. Then I start again.

McNair: What’s next, Lynn?

Sloan: I’m finishing the first draft of a novel. Now that I understand what it’s about, I’m eager to revise. But I might pause on that, and take a short break. I believe you challenged me to write a story about a young person.

[Patricia Ann McNair](#)



[Patricia Ann McNair](#) is the author of *And These Are the Good Times* (essays), and *The Temple of Air* (stories), McNair received the Chicago Writers Association Book of the Year Award, Southern Illinois University’s Devil’s Kitchen Reading Award, and the Society of Midland Authors Finalist Award. She teaches in the English and Creative Writing Department Graduate and Undergraduate Programs at Columbia College Chicago.