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Mona Simpson; Photo courtesy of Gasper Tringale

*Armed with the purpose of discovery and an open, inquisitive mind, we embark on an investigation that will take us between the neat folds of suburban life, behind presented shades of white and beneath kitchen counter surface illusions. There will be a thirst to examine, alter and ultimately clear away, even as we are tempted to hold to a place and time to preserve it all as it was. This is the unique perspective afforded to us in the quest for truths as bittersweet as they are necessary. We grow along this road of exploration, leaving with what we came for. We just might come full circle, to return home and, in the words of Eliot, "know the place for the first time."*

*We readers follow a thread through the richly thoughtful works of best-selling author Mona Simpson in the spirit of a clever scavenger hunt. There are recurring signature sub-themes, sayings and symbols that guide us to heightened awareness and levels of thought about timeless quandaries we face. From the inventive form of her latest novel, Casework to the unforgettable mother-daughter duo of her debut hit Anywhere But Here, we are ever kept in that skillful balance of being on the exterior, looking deeply in and on the interior, thinking and observing deeply out.*

*Simpson is the author of six works of fiction including: Anywhere But Here (adapted in the film version with Susan Sarandon and Natalie Portman), The Lost Father, A Regular Guy, Off Keck Road (a Pen Faulkner finalist), My Hollywood and Casework. She has been the recipient of a Whiting Prize, a Guggenheim, a grant from the NEA, a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University, a Lila Wallace Readers Digest Prize, a Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize, and a Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She is on the faculty at UCLA and also teaches at Bard College.*

Interview with Mona Simpson by Nicole M. Bouchard

~ Your latest novel, *Casework*, presents itself like a tangible artifact from the lives of its principle characters. The graphic novel-like presentation with drawings and notes is the ideal vehicle for this story of investigation and preservation on an intimate level. It's as though, like the boys, we are afforded a clandestine perspective of what we're not supposed to be witness to, uncovering ignored truths in the bottom of a drawer and taking them out to examine them one at a time.

*I love the dichotomy you name, between preservation and investigation, two impulses that threaten to destroy each other. I think in most of us, these two instincts conflict and remain in constant play. Do we want to learn more truth, or will that knowledge destroy the comforts we know and rely on?*

*In the beginning of Casebook, Miles and his best friend eavesdrop and spy to discover familiar, reassuring news: what they'll be allowed to watch on TV and when and which devices their mothers will consent to buy them. Their full expectation is that when they rig up a walkie-talkie under Miles' parents' bed and even later, when they manage to tap the phone, they'll overhear conversations that are about THEM. The first horror then is the awful truth that other people mostly aren't always talking about you. Or even thinking about you.*

*Then Miles begins to hear things that disturb him. He catches the thread of an unwinding danger that prompts him to continue his investigations.*

*Eventually, there's a point when the boys cease to be only relentless observers and investigators. They make a discovery and have to decide what to do with the awkward bundle of truth they're now carrying.*

What led to the inspired choice of this format?

*For me, one of the charms and themes of the novel was collaboration. I was reading Kahneman's great book Thinking, Fast and Slow and while I was fascinated by his findings about experienced pleasure and pain and how that sometimes differs from the memory of those feelings, what really took hold of me was the story of the two collaborators. They had a kind of love affair, as deep and abiding and meaningful as any sexual romance. The book is the story of the work Kahneman and Tversky did together but it's also the story of the joy of creative partnership, of working with someone deeply sympathetic and intellectually compatible and it's an elegy for the loss of that time—the best working years in both of their lives. Hector and Miles have that kind of connection. Miles wonders if he'll ever think so closely with anyone again. He may not. We all have*

***only a few chances for these great romantic connections in life and for some of us, work is near the deepest part of romance.***

Also, you'd remarked that the details and dialogue for this novel came to you during your work on it. In the likeness of the two young sleuths making a pyramid of discoveries along the way in their quest, what were some of the most interesting or surprising discoveries revealed to you about the story as you wrote?

***A few things surprised me. One was the way that interests traveled from person to person and ignited different engagements. A stray dog wanders into their yard and Eli and Miles take him to the pound. Miles and his sister each develop separate but significant involvements with animals from that point on in their lives.***

~ In the spirit of a clever scavenger hunt, the reader follows a thread through your works to discover signature traces of certain sub-themes, sayings and symbols; recurring amongst new characters and settings, the thread goes full circle to wrap around them in a solidified knot, underscoring their weight and presence.

***I love the notion of a scavenger hunt.***

The search for 'home' and the reflection or perception of a state of life seen through a house—real estate, homes cluttered with additions reminiscent of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's oyster shell in *Gift from the Sea* to depict the middle stage of family life in all its struggle and complexity, torn magazine pages depicting ideals people request and the responses that it will only look that way if they, the decorators take the pictures (*Off Keck Road* and *Casework*), personification of individuals or their interior beings through their living space. A particularly poignant example of the latter is Ann's NYC apartment in *The Lost Father*. Before she recognizes and reconciles the different aspects of herself, she has pieces of her old furniture crammed uncomfortably into the apartment that clash with the needs of the space physically and stylistically. Until she sorts her past, there are pieces within that don't fit with who she's trying to become.

***That's a perceptive reading and one I wouldn't have known myself. I am interested in homes, particularly in what makes them feel safe and permanent. I suppose that's not surprising. I***

***lived first in the old family home where my mother had grown up and then in a series of apartments. My mother happened to have a great eye and so the first place we lived, after my grandmother's house, was the upstairs of a house owned by a family called the Fossums. My mother painted the bricks white and we had white couches and she wallpapered my closet with the covers of children's books. I don't know where she got them. I asked where the inside part was—the books. But we didn't have them. We only had the paper. I owned a large tortoise in that apartment that I'd found by the side of the road. My mother threatened to make him into an ashtray. Eventually, he climbed off the roof-porch and was never seen again.***

***The first apartment I rented after college was in San Francisco and happened to be owned by a divorcing couple. I painted the studio and tried to sand the floors (with just sandpaper squares from the hardware store) and when all that was done, the husband screamed and threatened to evict me because I'd put a nail in the wall to hang a picture. He took the picture down and walked off with it.***

***I was so young and naïve and frightened that I believed I'd done something awful. I didn't own the place, I thought.***

There is the dualistic, Gatsby-esque use of the color white (ex. on Bea in *Off Keck Road*, on Adele in *Anywhere but Here*); trails of ants on counters or foods seeming to disturb a surface façade characters wish to be true; Mary in *Anywhere but Here* and Shelley in *Off Keck Road*, both tall women that endured polio and had a slight limp and a smile turned up to the left; private investigators hired to uncover versions of the truth in family life; intellect vs. more elusive qualities of beauty in relationships (men informing women that there may be others better-looking, but no one smarter and shifts between mothers and daughters on which trait gets the better of their focus); as well as chalkboard wisdom for the day.

Of these sub-themes, sayings and symbols that gently recur to tug at the mind like clues in a greater mystery, which of them are personally the most meaningful to you and why?

***Hmm. They all seem significant to me. In fiction, I like the extremes families which require intervention, either from the***

*state or from private parties, like the investigators. I'm also—isn't every woman—fascinated in understanding the role that appearance and beauty have played in women's lives, their survival, their luck, their advancement, and their security. I was a member of the generation that thought all that was over, only to discover that one's own sexuality also depends on received ideas of female allure...it's so complicated.*

*A year or two ago I was seated at a literary benefit at a table with a beautiful young editor. She was wearing a slender black dress, heels, jewelry, she was beautiful and completely calm about that. As if it had nothing to do with anything she said or thought or did in the world. That seemed to me marvelous and extraordinary. I was not like that as a young woman. I wore bulky sweaters and jeans. I wanted to be taken "seriously" as if there were two camps of women, the serious ones and the future wives.*

*The rift parallels the split we see in the way female writers are perceived. As literary or commercial, women's fiction, chick lit vs. Lydia Davis or Helen Vendler.*

*Let's rethink it all.*

~ In your years as an editor for *The Paris Review*, how did your own experiences in journalism and fiction inform your editorial approach and how did they align with the publication's founding premise of emphasizing creativity over criticism? What were some of your favorite aspects of your time there?

*The Paris Review was one of the examples of great good luck in my life. It actually started out as a failure. I'd wanted to teach in the schools. There was a program started by Lucy Calkins to teach creative writing in New York City public schools. When I was in Columbia's MFA program, the first year, I wanted to do that. But there was only one position open and my friend Robert Cohen got it. So Columbia sent me over to the Paris Review, where, my first day there, someone handed me a broom. The whole office was the size of a closet and George Plimpton's bicycle hung from the ceiling. Four of us worked there at adjoining desks, each of us with our own phone.*

***It turned out to be one of the great jobs of my life.***

***Several afternoons a week, I took the bus over and sat in an old overstuffed chair by the window and read manuscripts and wrote letters to the writers. I edited stories. It was wonderful.***

***The social side of the Paris Review in those days paralyzed me. Not because I didn't enjoy people. But I wanted to meet people as a writer, not as an editor of the Paris Review. Has anyone ever been so young and self-conscious? Nobody cares what they're meeting you as.***

***And of course, editors, writers, journalists, we're all just people who like to play with words.***

~ This question is asked in honor of the late Gabriel Garcia Marquez. You'd said in an early interview that he was one of the authors you loved. What was your favorite work of his and what do you think it says of the larger legacy he left behind? What do you personally think is one of the most significant impressions he wished to make?

***He wanted to create moments of transcendent kindness, unselfish generosity, the granular moments of goodness in a mess of predictable idiocy. As I reread him last month, it struck me how much he wrote about decency.***

~ Concerning the themes of love, money, beauty and religion (in terms of it being compared to the illusions of the other three), there seem to be darker internal character struggles with illusion in general, temptation and a pursuit of what does not last in a quest for permanence. As with Hans Christian Andersen's most well-known works of fairy tale literature ("The Little Mermaid", "The Little Match Girl", "The Snow Queen"...), there are tragic elements of love lost or unrequited, virtue in purity (lack of or repression of sexuality, seeing through the beauty of material things), belief despite lack, ambitious longing to be part of a better, higher world and redemption through familial/non-romantic love. In the beginning of *Casework*, there is a quote by Plato: "Everything that deceives can be said to enchant."

Carl Jung believed that our minds were relatively young in evolution and still wrought with trappings of ancient beliefs and understandings dictated



by symbols and archetypes. He felt that many of these, encased in deep layers of the collective unconscious, were seen in fairy tales, myths and literature that reflected these similar archetypes. In the tradition of authors like Andersen, do you feel it's important to study the human psyche through fiction, in the form of these characters that have to struggle and survive, sometimes in spite of themselves? Viewing real life under the microscope of some of these elemental, timeless themes?

***I love fairytales. And I do think we need to contend with our internalized ancient beliefs. No one can fall in love or develop a sexual life completely independently, without thousands of years of symbols and given patterns having their way with us.***

***We need to probe those myths and their intersections with felt experience.***

~ In *Anywhere But Here*, in an exchange between Theresa and Ann, there is a line about change and place that rings strikingly true: "I guess when you go away, you want it to be the same, but when you stay you want it to change." There is truth to being either nostalgic for the past or restless for the future. For some of the characters such as Bea and Bill in *Off Keck Road* who stayed out of sacrifice for their parents and characters such as Ann, Adele and June who left home to pursue different dreams, if their choices had been reversed, do you think that they would have become intrinsically different people, or inwardly the same, transplanted into different circumstances?

***That's a great question. I think we all live multiple lives, contained within the real one. I left Wisconsin when I was twelve and I feel like the other girl I would have become in high school, if I'd stayed, the young woman at college in Madison, all those possibilities are still somehow curled up inside me. That place, those voices, those humiliations, that landscape and beauty, the limitation of class I felt there, it's all still a source of material fascination.***

***I'm going there this summer. I hope to write another Wisconsin book.***

~ As our issue goes live in the month of May, this is a question for Mother's Day. In *Casework*, a mother's happiness is described as being "something

you recognize and then forget; it didn't seem to matter much at the time, though it spread through our bodies." In *The Lost Father*, Ann seems to come to a better understanding of her mother through finding her father. She asks if a person really loves anyone the way they love their mother. As a mother and a daughter, tell us what you feel are the most important facets of this complex and remarkable relationship.

***I've just written a piece about my mother for Mother's Day.***

***Here it is:*** <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-simpson-mothers-day-20140511-story.html>

\*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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