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Come in...and be captivated...

CAROLYN SEE- UNWRAPPED

This issue we have the pleasure of bantering with Carolyn See, non-fiction author of *Making a Literary Life*, novelist, winner of the Robert Kirsch Body of Work Award and a Guggenheim Fellowship in fiction, UCLA professor and Book Editor for the Washington Post. Her body of fiction, including *The Handyman* and *Golden Days*, as well as her body of non-fiction works, have received acclaim from the LA Times, Publisher's Weekly, the Washington Post and Newsweek. She serves on the board of the PEN Center USA West. Her truthful, non-sugar coated and undistilled views of the literary world offer fresh insight, perspectives, and truths about the unmistakable beauty and hardness of the profession which hard-core, dedicated writers ought to hear for comfort and survival.

1) In your wonderfully accessible book, *Making A Literary Life*, you stress in a highly humorous passage how important it is to keep your initial writing dreams and work to yourself so that they are not trodden upon by daily life and subject to other's opinions. You quote Gertrude Stein, talking about how she would write for herself after receiving a less than supportive opinion. Nathaniel Hawthorne expressed his feelings on his writing expression to his audience as follows: "The truth seems to be, however, that, when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few that will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates and lifemates." There have been conflicting theories over the years about who writers write for. Whom do you most often address when you write and how do you feel your choice affects your work and you, yourself, as the author?

I write for my best friend, whoever (whomever?) that best friend happens to be. I try to keep all thoughts of "greatness" out of my head, mainly because I detest hints of "greatness" in other writers I'm reading. Toni Morrison, for instance, reeks of "greatness," and she got her prize and good luck to her, but I think writing to be "grand" is a bad mistake. This is just a personal opinion, and I think it's gender-based. And I guess I chose Toni Morrison to talk about because she IS a woman -- tooting one's horn, blating on, opining, come much easier to men, I'm sorry to say. When I was young I read everyone dutifully, trying to better myself, I suppose, but now there are men I just won't read -- they seem to me to spend their time measuring their dicks (and cheating on the results)...Which, again, is fine. I just don't have to read about it. I think the important thing for women, who haven't been writing all that long in the great scheme of things, is to look out at the world they see, the world they have access to, and record it as plainly and accessibly as possible. Again, like going on a great trip, and then describing it to a friend.

2) In your novels, much of the unique plots surround difficult or extreme circumstances. Do you feel that either the best of people or the truth of people becomes apparent in the situations that stretch our bearing the most? Is this in part due to personal experience as in a "truth is stranger than fiction" philosophy?

I think "extreme circumstances" occur a little more often than we tend to notice. (No, not a nuclear war, like in GOLDEN DAYS), but plenty of very difficult stuff is going on much of the time, and one way we stay "sane" through life is to shut our eyes to it, just notice it, discount it. For instance, about ten days ago my doctor's assistant called up and said he had to cancel a routine appointment because of a "death in the family." I just made a new appointment and didn't think about it. Then I went in for what I thought would be a routine visit. I have macular degeneration which they can treat now by injections in the

eyeball which sounds a little worse than it is. It's a straightforward procedure -- they take a picture of your retina, then give you a reading exam, then put some anesthetic in your eye, wait ten minutes or so, then inject your eye, you go home and feel bad for a while and it's over. This time the doctor came in, gave me the anesthesia, went off and forgot about me for over an hour. A nurse noticed me and went and got him. He stood beside me and looked out straight ahead and gave a long speech which had to do with the death in the family, and that he had to make all the arrangements and that he hadn't been himself, and he placed great value on good service... and by this time I could only pat his arm and say "It's all right, it's all right," and he gave me the injection, which hurt like a bastard because the anesthesia had worn off, and then he left. I tugged on the nurse's sleeve and asked, "Who died, actually?" She said, "His new stepson. His life has changed forever." And it's true, he'd only been married a few months, and he was crazy about this woman - - as I'd learned in 15 minute increments over the months I'd been seeing him -- and it was a teenaged boy, and WHAM, there goes another set of lives, and not enough time in the world to make things right again. That's what I tend to write about, how to try to heal, how to get better, after one of these life shattering events occur. And they occur ALL THE TIME. We just try not to notice, until we have to, when something happens to us.

3) Although it is quite true that there is isolation and tumultuous obstacles in the literary world, what, besides the deep passionate thrill of the writing itself, makes you love the literary life? (In terms of every day [teaching at UCLA and in a creative writing capacity] and also in terms of milestones-first happy realizations of success, etc...) We are going for all out hopeful here!

I just love the whole thing. I think I talk about it in the first chapter of MAKING A LITERARY LIFE. I love going to signings and watching writers savor their day in the sun, I love to see writers getting together, I love the writing itself, I love writing reviews and the reading that entails, I love teaching -- especially

creative writing -- and watching students getting better. I'm not sure you have to have any particular talent; I think it's mostly a matter of matchmaking -- matching a writer to his or her proper material, and when they find that material, they just sing. I think it goes back to my dad, who had a great yearning and respect for the written word, and for a certain kind of "culture" that he really held sacred. We were very poor, but he bought an enormous square antique piano that took up half our living room, and he had collected a great set of California watercolors, and had the complete 26 volume set of Mark Twain. When he left (when I was eleven), he took all that stuff with him (including all the fun), and I saw how bereft and generally crappy a life without the consolations of art and literature can be. So I surround myself with that stuff. It's like magic for me.

4) In your work as book editor for the *Washington Post*, what, besides the basic elements of strong plot and well-depicted characters, do you look for in a book that moves you? Personally, what is your most important criteria?

I'm 74 now and I've been reviewing once a week, first for the LA Times then for the Washington Post, since I was about 34. So I don't really look for plot or character in the books I read -- because think how many times I've read a book about a guy who leaves his wife in Chapter One, has a great affair with great sex, and then returns to his wife in the last chapter because he's such a great guy? Maybe a thousand times, literally. I look for a different world -- I want to be surprised, knocked off my feet, blown out of my mind. *TELEX FROM CUBA* was a recent treat, the woman who wrote it had a mother who had been stationed with her parents in the United Fruit Company during the years when Castro was just tuning up to come down out of the mountains and take over the island. She (the author) painted a world I'd never seen or thought of, and it was just amazing. My daughter Lisa See's *SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN* does the same thing in a different way -- she writes about an obscure society of peasant women in China's interior who have developed a secret handwriting, but it's not about the hand

writing; it's about a world where women with bound feet spend their whole lives behind a window, in considerable pain, and still live deep, courageous, emotional lives. Or, there's a new biography of Emily Post, who started life as a New York society girl, was humiliated by her philandering husband, wrote some novels, then got started on etiquette and turned the lead of her life into gold. AND she snored so loud that when she spent time on Martha's Vineyard she could be heard in every corner of the village. I love to be surprised...

5) How do you feel about your different incarnations as a writer- non-fiction to fiction to teaching to journalism? How do they feed into one another?

I think all kinds of writing are pretty much the same. I know others don't always feel that way and I've met many journalists, for instance, who lament that they can never write a novel because of all the journalism ringing in their ears. I just don't see it that way. I think EVERYTHING IS FICTION. Each of our lives is an on-going novel, we notice the same things over and over. I used to have a husband who said life is like a track meet and I took the position that life is like a classroom, and we'd argue, but he kept on seeing things like a runner and I kept on seeing things like a student or a teacher. And I know femme fatale types who embarrass me quite a lot by noticing the genital areas of people we shouldn't (to my mind) be looking at. So a review of mine will be different from another's, an interview that I do will be heavily influenced by my mother's strict view of housekeeping; certainly my fiction will be an extension of my own world view. I think there are very few verifiable "facts" in this world.

6) What first prompted you to write *Making a Literary Life*? It's bare wisdom removes and steps on our rose-tinted glasses, but in a *most* essential way, discerns our passion for what is a difficult and rewarding existence. It also prepares us for the road ahead with an alert smile and a laugh in our eyes.

I wrote MAKING A LITERARY LIFE because, as a book critic, I was always getting desperate phone calls from wretched people who'd had a book come out and it wouldn't be in the stores and no one would have reviewed it and their editor wouldn't return their calls, etc. And I saw their tremendous ignorance, and also how they wanted to MAINTAIN that ignorance, so they could go on believing that they'd written the great American novel, and their lives would change and the whole world would change. Personally, I believe there's more self-deception going on about our writing than about anything else -- except for maybe drugs and sex. We WILL NOT believe our husbands are cheating on us, because to acknowledge that would mean death to all our hopes and dreams and also we might have to get a job. We WILL NOT believe our books are on death row instead of the best seller list. It's just too painful. Living on the west coast, starting work at a time when very few women wrote, I really did have to reinvent the wheel for myself. I thought putting this stuff in a book would be useful for beginning writers who really do have to make up things as they go along.

7) Looking back over your hard work and extremely successful career, is there anything you would have changed? If you could sit down for coffee with the youthful version of yourself, a budding writer, what do you believe she would say about where you are now? Would you make this journey over again?

First of all, I don't think it's been hard work, and I've only been moderately successful. But I'm happy with what I've done. I would tell my younger self not to lose my temper, and to go back to New York more often -- to keep my contacts more fresh. But truthfully, I don't think I'd be able to do either of those things even with the benefit of hindsight. Writers are often treated shabbily -- lied to, pure and simple, and it's hard not to get angry when that happens. And I don't like New York very much! There are some very sweet people in publishing, and by and large I've been lucky, but after about ten days in that city I feel like I need to go through the car wash. So my older self could give my

younger self that good advice, but my younger self wouldn't (or couldn't) take it! And my younger self would be frankly amazed at how nicely everything has turned out -- not just the writing, but that my family is so swell and has so much fun together -- in spite of life being a potentially trying experience.

8) What are your plans for the future? We must admit that we'd love a sneak peek.

I'm working on a common sense book of etiquette about getting sick and dying. How to treat people who are getting sick and then sicker and then dying, and how to treat yourself when that experience happens to you. I'm at an age when about half of the original people in my life are dead, and I've noticed that when those circumstances occur, common sense goes out the window, tantrums occur; fur flies. A little planning ahead could ease the process, I think. It's written in almost the same format as **MAKING A LITERARY LIFE, anecdotal and very specific, and often pretty funny. Like my other books, it's aimed at minimizing suffering, if at all possible.**

*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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