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Writing in History: An Interview with Erika Dreifus

With her debut short story collection, *Quiet Americans*, writer Erika Dreifus proves her immense talent at crafting tales with “incredible emotional nuance and empathy” says *Shelf Unbound*. Dreifus, who has degrees from Harvard in Modern European (primarily British and French) History and Literature, uses this historical knowledge in her writing. Dreifus is also the editor/publisher of the free, popular, online newsletter *The Practicing Writer*, where she generously shares her knowledge of writing resources and advice.

Given the ALA Sophie Brody Medal Honor title for 2012, *Quiet Americans* is a collection comprised of historical knowledge seamlessly blended with the family stories of her paternal grandparents, German Jews who escaped the Nazi regime for the United States.

Quiet Americans was an assigned text for my Fiction class when Dreifus came to SUNY Geneseo to give a reading of her collection before speaking directly to my class. As I read, I found myself pausing after each story to put the book down so I could process the emotional intensity of what I had just read. Each story of Dreifus’ nearly wrenched my heart from my chest. The feelings present in each story transcend the page and haunt the reader. At Dreifus’ reading, where she read “Lebensraum,” I suddenly flashed to sitting in my great-grandparents’ farm house, listening to them tell me stories about World War II. Dreifus’ stories are entirely relatable and that is why they resonate with so many people.

In the interview below, Dreifus kindly answers questions about *Quiet Americans*, along with imparting some insight about her writing process.

Can you talk about your writing process? How do you start a story—with a character or an outline?

Unfortunately, I'm typically unable to benefit from either a character or an outline. For me, a story emerges from a circumstance, or a set of circumstances, that I find compelling. There's a situation that makes me wonder: *How did that happen? How did it change things for everyone involved? What was at stake?*

How much of the content in *Quiet Americans* was inspired by your grandparents' stories?

Several of the stories in the book were sparked directly from my grandparents' experiences as I'd understood them, from my grandparents' accounts of circumstances that seemed to me fairly extraordinary and demanded further exploration. For instance, "For Services Rendered" developed from my grandmother's account of a pediatrician she came to know as a refugee here in New York City; "Lebensraum" emerged from my grandfather's World War II military service in the U.S. Army; "Homecomings" stemmed, in part, from my grandmother's childhood memories and her experience, recounted to me later, of returning to her hometown for the first time in 1972. One story, "Matrilineal Descent," was born more from my questions about a story that wasn't told, about my grandfather's biological mother, who died when he was an infant.

How did you decide the order of the collection? Why are "Matrilineal Descent," "Lebensraum," and "Homecomings" placed together? Do you think they would've had the same effect had they been separated?

This is a great question! You've read the book—what do **you** think about the effect and how it might have been different?

This question also makes me want to mention a wonderful new collection that I've just finished reading, David Ebenbach's *Into the Wilderness*, in which the four linked stories are spaced throughout the book, which is to say that one of the linked stories begins the collection, and another one ends it, and two others are essentially placed, non-sequentially, elsewhere.

But back to *Quiet Americans*: For the most part, there's a chronological thread running through those stories, so it made sense to have them follow each other. There are seven stories in the book—"Homecomings" comes at the midpoint. That story takes place in 1972; the three stories that precede it, including "Matrilineal Descent" and "Lebensraum" are set in periods prior to 1972, and the three stories that follow it take us up to the early years of the 21st century. So there's that general logic.

How does your degree in history influence your writing? Can you talk about the way research informs your fiction?

On a very direct level, my experiences studying history have presented me with some amazing opportunities to discover some of those circumstances I was alluding to earlier. For example, it was while I was conducting dissertation research in an archive in France that I found a set of letters that led me to write my first (but alas, unpublished) book of fiction, a novel.

On another level, as you've suggested, my training in history helped sharpen my research skills more broadly. But I should note that I earned my PhD in 1999, which seems like a lifetime ago for a number of reasons, including the fact that so much more research is accessible online these days. I'm a little envious of newer scholars and the skills and opportunities that they have in that respect.

How long did you work on this collection?

Well, I drafted the "oldest" story for the first time in the fall of 2001, and the collection was published in January 2011. So, all told, it took nearly 10 years. I hope that readers will agree that it was time well spent!