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Interview with Amina Gautier

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Amina Gautier: An Interview

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Amina Gautier currently teaches at DePaul University in Chicago. Her short stories have appeared in numerous literary journals such as *The Antioch Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *North American Review*. Winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award, her first collection, *At-Risk*, explores struggles faced by young African Americans. Her second collection, *Now We Will Be Happy*, was recently awarded the Prairie Schooner Book Prize and will be released on September 1, 2014.

It was a pleasure to hear Gautier bring her work *At-Risk* to life during her visit to SUNY Geneseo and to work with her on this interview.

GANDY DANCER: Can you talk about how you selected the title *At-Risk* for your collection? We were struck by the contrast between the title, which suggests statistics and sociological reports, and the stories, which examine the particular lives of individuals. Also, your characters often allude to feelings of invisibility—they refer to themselves as “statistics” and “indistinguishable black kids.” How does the concept of invisibility intertwine with the idea of danger or being at-risk?

AMINA GAUTIER: *At-Risk* is comprised of ten stories which center on the options available to underprivileged “at-risk” African American youth in Brooklyn, New York. The stories in the collection are set in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the war on drugs, the tail end of Reaganomics, increased budget cuts in public education, and the rise of gifted or enrichment programs to aid underprivileged public school kids. Though the point of view varies from

first to third and from male to female, all ten stories feature child protagonists and are told from the points of view of the kids or adolescents in the story. In compiling the collection and entitling it *At-Risk*, I sought to give names and faces to children who have been marginalized and to put narrative pressure on the term at-risk itself, believing that when we affix labels like at-risk, low-income, disadvantaged or underprivileged to the same kids we claim we wish to help, we enact a dehumanizing process of erasure upon them. Furthermore, in choosing to tell the stories from the vantage points of children, I sought to depict children in a realistic manner devoid of the sentimentalized renderings they so often receive, to pierce the veil of nostalgia that encourages readers to remember childhood as a period of innocence and leisure and remind us how dangerous a time childhood can be.

GD: Other characters in *At-Risk* seem very aware--and often irritated-- by the fact that they fall under the gaze of those with more privilege. Dorothy, the protagonist in "Afternoon Tea," especially resents the women who view her as someone to rescue. What do you hope readers will understand from characters like Dorothy, characters that are skeptical of the role models and charity imposed upon them?

AG: When readers encounter characters like Dorothy and Naima and many others in the collection, I hope that they will see them as individuals rather than types and that this way of seeing will color their real world experiences as well, so that they think first before they condescend or presume to know what others desire. Well-wishers and do-gooders abound in this world (for which I am thankful); yet, truly compassionate people can become enamored of their own volunteerism, such that it takes on a life of its own and overrides, erases, silences, or fails to take into account the needs of the people. At such a point, altruism disappears and vanity rears its head.

GD: Many of your protagonists seem to be girls on the brink of adulthood, just going through puberty. What are the specific challenges or pleasures associated with writing from the point of view of someone younger than you?

AG: I don't focus greatly on the gender of the protagonists in the collection; both males and females get plenty of narrative time with me. Part of the point of the collection is to depict adolescents—the point of view characters are all between the ages of ten and sixteen, which is a time period that happens to cover puberty. As Henry James demonstrated in *What Maisie Knew*, writing from the child's --or adolescent's-- point of view can enrich fiction by adding an additional layer of conflict, vulnerability, and depth above and beyond the conflict of the story's own dramatic action. Point of view becomes an extra conflict area. 'Adult problems' such as gun violence ("The Ease of Living"), drug addiction ("Some Other Kind of Happiness" and "Pan

is Dead”), assimilation, racial profiling, and drug use (“Dance for Me”), homophobia (“Boogiemen”), pedophilia/statutory rape (“Girl of Wisdom”), unplanned pregnancy and single motherhood (“Afternoon Tea” and “Held”), drug dealing (“Yearn”), and public education budget cuts (“Push”) are more revealing when seen through the lens of a younger protagonist living in a culture riddled by such problems while lacking the maturity to make sense of, or the power to effect, change.

GD: Some of the most interesting relationships in the collection are those between mothers and daughters or mothers and sons. Can you talk about your interest in these relationships—and other intergenerational ones, such as the one between Jason and his grandfather in “The Ease of Living”?

AG: I think it’s pretty safe to generalize and say that (unless you’re a child celebrity with an income) until you reach adulthood and your circle widens to include co-workers and other types of people, as a child/kid/teen, the people in your life with fall into three main groups of (1) people to whom you are related, (2) people in your neighborhood or on your block, and (3) people you know from school. Unless I wished to write a collection about adolescent orphans, it would have been virtually impossible to write a collection about adolescents without including their relationships with members of their families. Families come in units other than nuclear ones, so the stories mirror and reflect reality by depicting a variety of different family structures that reflect those we encounter every day.

GD: “Girl of Wisdom” depicts the development of a sexual relationship between Melanie, a young girl, and a much older man. Despite her youth, it’s hard to view Melanie as a victim and Milton as a villain. What were the particular challenges of writing these characters? How did you perceive Milton, and how did you want him to be perceived?

AG: The understanding of the story rests upon point of view. I wouldn’t say that point of view is a challenge for me as the writer, but it may well be a challenge for some readers. “Girl of Wisdom” uses dramatic irony, so that the reader is privy to information about Melanie that Milton is not. The very first word of the story tells us Melanie’s age, but this is information given in narrative, not dialogue. Therefore, the reader knows that Melanie is underage, but since Melanie deliberately withholds information about her age from Milton, he is unaware that she is underage.

GD: The stories in *At-Risk* are loosely linked by setting and theme. Can you talk about the order of the stories and how you organized the collection?

AG: “The Ease of Living” and “Yearn” are the only two stories in the collection in which characters recur. Thus, the decision to begin with one and end with the other constitutes a deliberate choice that allows the stories to

function as the frame for the collection to which the other eight stories

cohere. The ten stories are all set in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bed-Stuy, Brownsville, and East New York during a six year period comprising the late 1980s and early 1990s, and roughly half of the stories are about kids who escape the vagaries of their neighborhood's dangers and the other half who don't. Each of the stories in the collection has a mirror image, a counter-part, a "flipside," if you will, which should be apparent upon reading. In regards to the ordering, the chronological order of "The Ease of Living" and "Yearn" was intentionally reversed. Thus, the reader begins the collection being told what Kiki and Stephen's fate will be in "The Ease of Living," but is allowed to see them in the last story, "Yearn."

GD: We got really invested in your characters, such as Kim and her sisters in "Held," and Jason and his grandfather in "The Ease of Living." What are you working on now? Any chance we might encounter these characters again in a novel?

AG: Time will tell.