

12-1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Steil, Sarah (2016) "An Interview with Sonja Livingston," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 25.
Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol5/iss1/25>

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An Interview with Sonja Livingston

Sonja Livingston teaches creative writing at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, where she resides during the academic year. She is a native of Rochester, New York, and returns there every summer. Her writing has appeared in the *Iowa Review*, *Brevity*, *Southeast Review*, and *Alaska Quarterly Review*. Her three books, *Ghostbread*, *Queen of the Fall*, and *Ladies Night at the Dreamland*, are well-respected essay collections on memory, history, and women's lives. Her writing has been honored with an *Arts & Letters* Essay Prize, a NYFA Fellowship, and grants from Vermont Studio Center and the Deming Fund for Women. After Sonja visited SUNY Geneseo, I had the pleasure of interviewing her about her writing.

SARAH STEIL: In *Queen of the Fall*, you discuss the difference between fact and truth, after your sister offers you a different perspective on one of your childhood memories. In nonfiction, how do you separate the two, and when do you have to inform readers that your own truths may not always align with others' facts?

SONJA LIVINGSTON: This is a good question and one that comes up regularly when you write from memory, which is imperfect. While I don't ever want to fictionalize in an essay or a memoir, I tend to be less concerned with how my version of things lines up with others'. This may sound more nonchalant than I intend, but the truth is that even if two people could somehow manage to have the same exact experience in life, their perceptions of that experience would differ in significant ways. Why? Because we are pulsing/imperfect/wildly complex creatures overlaid with all kinds of preferences,

sensitivities, and proclivities. What and how we notice as we go through life is as unique as our fingerprints. Some people may see this as a shortcoming of memoir or personal essay, but I find it to be a source of power and beauty. When I fall in love with a piece of writing, it's not usually based on *what* the writer has experienced so much as *how* he or she has made sense of that experience and communicates it on the page. So while fact and truth are different creatures, this is not the same as fictionalizing, which involves purposefully making things up. Readers of literary nonfiction don't want to be lied to, but neither do they want to read a list of straight facts—otherwise they'd reach for encyclopedias and court transcripts. We're hungry to experience aspects of the real world through the unique filter of another human being. That's what drives us to each other and to personal stories.

SS: The essays, in their examination and veneration of women, investigate the important women in your own life: your mother, sisters, grandmother, and niece. How do you write about your family while respecting both your experiences and theirs? Do your family members ever object to the rendering of a certain memory?

SL: A sister once told me that I'd gotten it wrong and she was actually present in a scene when I said she was not. My mother has never complained to me directly, but I have no doubt that she'd prefer I write about medieval monastic traditions or the migrating birds of Alaska than personal experience. But actually, I've been surprised at how few people have objected because it must be tough to be rendered as a character in someone else's narrative.

It would certainly be easier if I could just leave others out of my writing. But our lives are not lived in isolation. When you write personal essays, you'll almost always have to include others—not only those in your families, but strangers, minor acquaintances, and even historical figures.

You would think that the more I do this, the easier it would become, but I've grown more sensitive to this issue over time. You never know what will bother someone, whether it's better to leave them in or out of a scene, or how such decisions impact the commitment to truth—and by the way, I should say that where some people see sticking to the truth as a burden, I don't write nonfiction because of certain theoretical literary guidelines, but because I'm in love with the real world and the riches it offers. But back to the question: while I wish I could say I'd never write about my mother again, she is part of who I am in ways that can't be separated out or broken. What I can do, however, and what I have done when it comes to writing about other people, is to include only what's needed for the sake of the larger story and to portray others with dignity and respect. Anything else is not only bad karma but tends to produce terrible writing.

SS: With *Ghostbread*, you explore your experience growing up in poverty, along with the lives of your six siblings and mother. I wondered if *Queen of the Fall* is a sort of extension of *Ghostbread*—a closer examination into the lives of independent women, inspired by being raised by a single mother. Did the recording of many of your childhood memories in *Ghostbread* influence your desire to write *Queen of the Fall*?

SL: Great question. After writing *Ghostbread*, I didn't think I'd ever write more about my own life. But, after the book came out, I was invited to give readings and was asked questions that kept the subject of my childhood churning in my head. For instance, people wanted to know how I "made it out" of poverty, or how I ended up as a professor and a writer. At the same time, my own interests were becoming more centered on gender and the ways in which even my experience of child poverty was largely feminine. This seems so obvious now, but it was only by going around and reading from the book that I began to notice that there were hardly any fathers around in my early life, or how often the girls I grew up with ended up repeating the same patterns as our mothers. So while the writing of *Ghostbread* didn't lead to writing *Queen of the Fall* directly, sharing that memoir with others kept the experiences alive in ways that led to the writing of those essays.

SS: In both *Queen of the Fall* and *Ladies Night at the Dreamland*, you explore your desire to know suffragist Susan B. Anthony personally—even going so far as to address her directly in your work. You mention Hillary Clinton's first campaign for president, and how we expect of powerful women a certain degree of softness. Do you believe Hillary Clinton's rise to favored presidential candidate would redefine how Susan B. Anthony thinks of the society in which we currently live? Does it reinforce the power of women, or do we still expect a certain warmth and kindness?

SL: Okay, so I'm responding to this question on the day after the election. I spent yesterday morning at Susan B.'s grave watching people lean in and touch her stone. Little kids came by waving flags, groups of friends posed for pictures, older women smiled about as widely as I've ever seen. The mood was jubilant. If I'd answered this question then, I'd have talked about how far we've come and how proud Susan B. might be, and the thrill of all those grandmothers and mothers and little girls lined up to honor her work and legacy. But that was yesterday. Today, the mood has shifted. Hillary Clinton did not win. If she were a man, I have no doubt that she would have, but the loss of such a qualified candidate makes it clear we still struggle with women who make open bids for power. People don't say that directly, of course. Instead they say: "I can't put my finger on it, there's just something about her. I just can't warm to her. I don't trust her. I'd vote for a woman, just not this one."

I get it. I have struggled with strong women and have just started to look at how much more comfortably I submit to the authority of men. I think we all need to examine our tastes and distastes more deeply to see how much they have to do with the ways in which we have defined femininity and the repercussions for women who try to step out of that pretty pink box.

SS: *Queen of the Fall* focuses on the lives of particular women in your life, in history, and in culture. You write about Susan B. Anthony, about the Native woman on the box of Land O'Lakes butter, and your own family. What inspired you to write about each of these individual women—to examine the many struggles women face?

SL: I chose to write about characters like the Land O'Lakes maiden or Susan B. Anthony or the women saying the rosary on the radio because those experiences stayed with me over the years and arose in the writing. I didn't make a list of who might be interesting or the various angles on femininity I might consider. That would have been a fine approach, but for me, the thrill (and challenge) of writing nonfiction involves staying open to whatever rises up from the past and trusting that those people or images or questions have something important to offer. In the case of the Land O'Lakes maiden, for instance, I didn't know why I remembered her, only that I did. It was only in writing the essay that I began to explore why and how she mattered. The same with Susan B.; I never got over my guilt about not liking her very much as a kid, but instead of just writing that, I let the essay become an exploration of why I didn't connect with such a trailblazing woman and what that might say about me and our culture.

What happens in essays, when I'm lucky or patient enough, is that the writing opens up and becomes more universal. So while I begin with a personal memory, the more I examine it, the wider my scope becomes, and I find that I'm suddenly talking about a larger issue. The Land O'Lakes maiden, for instance, isn't just a quirky memory or a character on a dairy product, but a symbol of how we have both destroyed and appropriated Native culture and of how we portray and commodify women's bodies. As writers, we often want to tackle these big concepts such as greed or war or gender, and it's important that we do, but nothing allows us access to them like paying close attention to the small moments in our own lives.

SS: *Ghostbread*, *Queen of the Fall*, and your newest book, *Ladies Night at the Dreamland*, feature collections of lyric essays. Often, readers are given several independent vignettes that inform and develop one another. Can you speak to your writing and formatting process? Do you start with a particular account of a memory, and then develop it into a larger work?

SL: I noticed when responding to the question above that I used the verb "explore" a few times. That's no accident. For me, writing is exploration of

the world around me in the same way that travel can be. The difference is that travel takes me to a larger place to help me more fully locate myself, while writing takes me inside myself to help access a much wider perspective.

Because I approach the essay as an exploration and because I like to weave various strands of thought together as I contemplate, the writing often develops as a series of vignettes or sections. I edit later and often delete or severely prune or re-order. Depending on the content or purpose of the writing, I might force myself to push the essay closer together and into a more traditional form, but very often the essay remains physically segmented and makes liberal use of white space. This can require more work on the part of the reader, but even as a reader, I enjoy segmented essays for the space and invitation to connect the dots and to arrive at my own conclusions. This is the difference between art and entertainment, I think. Okay, that sounds slightly obnoxious, but for me, writing is like a painting. Sure, the painter is the one who puts the colors and shapes on the canvas, but the images and emotions that arise from that creation will change depending on the viewer and what he or she brings to the table. There's hardly anything more exciting than this collaboration. It reminds me of how alive writing can be, how it can not only inform and engage us, but can actually connect us to one another—even (and especially) when we feel isolated and far apart.