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An Interview with Leslie Pietrzyk

Leslie Pietrzyk is the author of the novel *Silver Girl*, released in 2018 by Unnamed Press and called “profound, mesmerizing, and disturbing” in a *Publishers Weekly* starred review. In November 2021, Unnamed Press published *Admit This to No One*, a collection of stories set in Washington, D.C. *The Washington Post* called it “a tour de force from a gifted writer.” Pietrzyk’s collection of unconventionally linked short stories, *This Angel on My Chest*, won the 2015 Drue Heinz Literature Prize and was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. *Kirkus Reviews* named it one of the sixteen best story collections of the year. Her previous novels are *Pears on a Willow Tree* and *A Year and a Day*. Short fiction and essays have appeared in *Southern Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Hudson Review*, *The Sun*, *Shenandoah*, *Arts & Letters*, *River Styx*, *Iowa Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *New England Review*, *Salon*, *Washingtonian*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Washington Post Magazine*, and many others. She has received fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference and the Sewanee Writers’ Conference, and in 2020, her story “Stay There” was awarded a Pushcart Prize. Pietrzyk is a member of the core fiction faculty at the Converse low-residency MFA program and often teaches in the MA Program in Writing at Johns Hopkins University. Raised in Iowa, she now lives in North Carolina. Website: www.lesliepietrzyk.com

Gandy Dancer: *Admit This to No One* is a short story collection that follows the story of a politically-motivated attack on the Speaker of the House. The collection explores how this attack affects the women in his life, but its short stories are not ordered in a clear-cut, wholly chronological manner. What motivated you to order the short stories the way you did?

Leslie Pietrzyk: I can't be so bold as to say that straightforward chronological order bores me...but shaking up the timeline of events offers interesting and unexpected perspectives. I felt that a book that's loosely linked—through place and theme rather than characters—would need to signal early on its intention to create its own rules, to show it may not be guided by the beginning-middle-end constraints of a more traditional work. Additionally, while we live life chronologically, how we come to make sense of our place in the world very much feels non-chronological to me. More and more, I want my writing to reflect that experience.

GD: Power is a constant theme in *Admit This to No One*. One of the lines that struck me the most exemplifies this is the short story, "Stay There," which reads, "Politics is about power. Maybe art is too." I'm interested in exploring that declaration further. How did creating and publishing this short story collection inform your view of that thesis?

LP: In a very raw sense, politics is about persuasion, about crafting a narrative to draw others to your side, about creating a sense of the "truth." Art, too, is crafting a narrative: sending one's private vision out into the uncaring world and hoping for an emotional response, hoping that others will recognize and respond to your "truth." Who could be more power-hungry than the person saying, "Listen to me. Here's what I think"? I can only speak to the art of the written word here, but writers create worlds from mere words on the page, convincing readers to imagine Hogwarts is a real place, putting them on the raft with Huck and Jim, creating worry that Hamlet won't have the guts to avenge his father's death. One of my favorite moments as a writer is when a reader assumes something I've written is true; I just love saying, "No, I made that up." In my mind, I'm adding, *And I made you believe it was true.*

GD: This collection grapples with challenging and uncomfortable conversations happening nationwide, from gender, to sex as power to racism and "de facto" segregation. Throughout your writing process, how did you handle the nuances and misgivings present in these topics? How did you approach them?

LP: I knew this book was taking risks, so I understood upfront that some readers might not be willing to follow me. That's okay. There are plenty of other books in the world. My approach as I shaped these stories (mostly during the lockdown) was to lean into the most uncomfortable option at every writing crossroads: what would make the character the most uncomfortable here? What would make the reader uncomfortable? What would make me, the writer, most uncomfortable? Once I identified that option, I went with it. As for handling these tricky topics, while I worked to get things right, I also understood that I might fail at points. But, speaking generally, I stayed aware of avoiding crummy tropes like the "white savior," and I tried to be hardest

on what I'll call "myself": the character who was the nice white suburban lady with good intentions. I wasn't going to create characters merely to mock them or poke at easy villains. I wrote with the hope (and possibly good intentions!) to reflect the complexities of the world around me.

GD: Building from that, "This Isn't Who We Are" takes a departure from many of the stories that preceded it in its narration and structure. Instead of directly connecting to the Speaker, it uses an arresting second-person voice to force the reader to think about how race functions in D.C., but also throughout the United States. Can you talk about how that piece came to be? Were there any difficulties or trepidations you had to work through in writing it?

LP: Trust me, this is the scariest story I've ever written! It came from my walks around my neighborhood, observing all the well-intentioned yard signs (which I'm not inherently opposed to) about kindness and such, even as I thought about various unkindnesses and subtle microaggressions found on our neighborhood listserv. This led to my thinking about microaggressions I have witnessed and/or perpetuated, sometimes unknowingly. This story was intended to be a fictionalized interrogation of myself and my actions, as uncomfortable as that was going to be. This is one of those lucky times where words just spilled out in a torrent. The more distant second-person POV (not me or I, but "you" did these things) helped access this difficult material. I'm certain my editor was extremely nervous about this story, and she offered a fair amount of input on it. I confess that for everything she asked me to remove, it seemed I added something else, literally until the day I handed in the final draft. I've heard from a lot of people who have found this story especially thought-provoking, which is gratifying.

GD: *Admit This to No One* is a title that demands. How did you decide on that story's title for the book as a whole? What does keeping secrets do to a person? What does demanding someone else to keep something hidden do to them?

LP: This book originally had a different title that I loved, that the editor definitely didn't love or even like. I had about a third of the book written, and when I reread what I had, I found that phrase "he will admit this to no one" in the title story (which had a different, truly awful title), and I latched onto the phrase as an organizing theme to guide me through writing the rest of the book: what is each character not admitting to him/herself? Fortunately, the editor loved the title, and quickly I realized that this title was far superior to the one I had been so attached to.

These are characters with a number of secrets, living in a secretive city. While my characters feel shame around these secrets they're holding, many are perfectly ordinary desires (i.e., wanting to feel loved). But this culture of secrecy begins to feel dangerously routine, and—it seems—the only escape

my characters find is through self-destructive actions, smashing the status quo. That's the sort of deep tension a writer dreams about.

GD: Many different points of view are featured in *Admit This to No One*, from the second-person, explored in "This Isn't Who We Are," to young teen girls, middle-aged women, and women in their 20s. We are even given a few male perspectives, such as Drew in "Wealth Management" and The Speaker himself in "We Always Start With the Seduction." How do you go about writing from so many different perspectives? Were any your favorite to write? Which were the most difficult?

LP: Point of view is one of my favorite craft elements to ponder, so it doesn't surprise me that I ended up with so many different perspectives. As I work on a long project, I enjoy thinking about questions and situations from different angles. Mary Grace was a later addition to this cast, and I'm afraid I really, really loved thinking like her and capturing her voice. I'm mystified and fascinated by someone extremely powerful yet content to remain in the background. I bet I'll write more about her in the future. The Speaker was my biggest challenge. I had to fight the countless stereotypes of what a politician is like while also making this man believable as an actual politician. He's pretty unsavory, so I worried that readers would immediately dislike him, so I wanted to find some scraps of his humanity. But he's so guarded, I couldn't get a first-person voice. Ultimately, I understood that he's "the Speaker," a man who sees himself perpetually in a role, someone who may not have an "I" left. Third-person was perfect for him, as was the reader mostly viewing him through the eyes of the women.

GD: This collection is incredibly timely, asserting itself in the turbulent present with references as varied as from Hillary Clinton declaring "deplorables," to the alt-right pipeline many of America's young boys and men fall into. How do you balance writing something that speaks to the now while also crafting something that functions in the future?

LP: Another challenge! And another reason it's hard to write fiction about politics, which is ever-changing. I'm grateful my editor was understanding about last-minute insertions. The most topical bits I included are tiny details vs. giant plot points, so that's one suggestion for writers who want to stay au courant, to think about the way something small will reverberate in a larger sense. I spent some time considering what the social justice protest should be about in the final story, "Every Man in History," which, technically, is set several years in the future. I wanted a cause that would feel relevant to today's readers while also sounding plausible yet unresolved as the book ages. I was thrilled to land upon removing the slaveholder names from Washington D.C.'s famous monuments because that cause connected the literal city back into the story.

GD: A bonus question! I know that you are an avid cook and that cooking is a big part of your life. I am always fascinated by passions intersecting, and am curious if cooking informs your creative process. Is it part of your creative process at all? Did you find yourself cooking one particular dish while you worked on *Admit This to No One*?

LP: Often I write until the early evening and then cook dinner. The cooking becomes a way to unwind as my mind drifts free. I was doing a lot of the heavy-duty writing on these stories during the early days of the lockdown, when it felt scary to go to the grocery store, and when many of us were finding different ways to source food. On Saturdays, I lined up to buy big vegetable boxes at our local farmer's market and learned to cook with what I had, rather than choosing a recipe and buying those ingredients. There were some misses, but in retrospect, I enjoyed that creativity, and we discovered some excellent dishes, like pesto made from the lovely greenery on the carrots. Don't get me wrong: I also ate a lot of Pop-Tarts during this time. Honestly, what a failure not to work a single Pop-Tart into the book!

[This is similar to the carrot top pesto recipe I used: <https://www.forkintheroad.co/carrot-top-pesto/>]