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An Interview With Stephanie Vanderslice

Stephanie Vanderslice is the author of *The Lost Son*, a historical fiction novel published by Regal House Publishing in March of 2022. She is a professor and director of the Arkansas Writers MFA Workshop at the University of Central Arkansas, a Huffington Post writing life blogger, and boasts multiple publications on writing. These include *The Geek's Guide to the Writing Life: An Instructional Memoir for Prose Writers* published by Bloomsbury in 2014, and *Can Creative Writing Really Be Taught?: Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*, also published by Bloomsbury, which received its 10th anniversary edition in 2017. Regarding *The Lost Son*, Benjamin Ludwig perhaps says it best: “*The Lost Son* is an unflinching look at how one woman, and her two sons, reinvent themselves against a backdrop of violence and violation. I loved this book.”

Gandy Dancer: *The Lost Son* is a historical fiction novel that follows Julia Kruse, a German immigrant and mother who is forced to rebuild her life in 1920s Queens, New York, after her infant son, Nicholas, is kidnapped and taken back to Germany by her husband and the child's nurse. As a writer, what drew you to write about this material?

Stephanie Vanderslice: In the early aughts, I learned that my great grandmother, Julia, had actually been my step-great grandmother who married my great grandfather at the end of World War II. I also learned that soon after her second child was born, her first husband and the baby's nurse had taken him from her and gone back to Germany. She was left to support and raise her oldest son. During WWII, her two sons did fight on opposite sides. Once

I learned this history, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I had two young sons myself at the time and spent a lot of time thinking about how someone could even survive this, could even trust another person to marry again. With little information to go on, I started making up my own story.

GD: Throughout the novel, there are a number of time shifts between Julia's life as a child in Germany, her life in the 1920s just after the loss of her baby, and her life in the 1940s during World War II. Can you talk about the decision to tell the story in this way rather than telling it in chronological order?

SV: I ended up making these shifts to keep the story compelling and as a nuanced way to foreshadow. That is, to bring the story to a turning point in one timeline, and then shift to another and do the same thing, to keep the reader's attention. Also, the very first full draft of this novel was written for National Novel Writing Month (nanowrimo.com), where the challenge is to draft (and I emphasize the word draft) a 50,000 word novel in one month, which works out to about 1600 words a day. In order to stay productive, I made a list of at least 30 scenes that needed to happen in the novel. That way, when I rose at an ungodly hour every single day to get my word count in (I am *not* a morning person) I could choose the scene I was most motivated to write that day, which was not necessarily the next scene chronologically. So I didn't originally draft it in order either but eventually, I put it in chronological order and then started juxtaposing scenes/timelines for better effect and narrative movement.

GD: The settings of 1920s and 1940s Queens, New York, as well as the periphery settings, feel so tangible while reading. With so many time periods and settings, what was your research process like for this novel?

SV: My research consisted of "casting a wide net" and reading and watching as much as I could. I read a lot of novels and memoirs that took place in New York City and Germany during this time period, as well as memoirs of parents who were separated from or lost children. I find memoirs from people who lived through an experience especially helpful as primary sources. I also watched movies set during this period, read a few general history books of World War II and watched *Band of Brothers* all the way through twice (as well as read some memoirs from soldiers who had been part of the "Band of Brothers"). I kept a map of Europe in 1945 over my desk so I could easily see where battle lines were in Germany when the last part of the novel takes place. I'm from Queens, originally, as well, so a lot of the landmarks are from my childhood—Eddie's Sweet Shoppe, which is still there, and Merkens, which is long gone. My grandfather used to take me to Merkens as a child, and I can see it clearly in my mind's eye. Once I was revising, moreover, I kept a running list of questions that needed answers, like, "what kind of jobs did people have in breweries?" or "how would you find a soldier fighting in Germany at the end of World War II?" Then I looked them up on the internet or, asked

them flat out on a discussion board on NaNoWriMo that specifically dealt with World War II history, which was very handy. Keeping the running list meant that once I was deep into writing and revising, I didn't get distracted or interrupted by internet rabbit holes and instead, pursued those answers at another time. I have to work really hard not to be distracted because history is endlessly fascinating to me.

GD: Julia's sister, Lena, is a recurring character in the novel. Their relationship is strained, though they support each other in times of need. What were some of the difficulties of writing their troubled relationship?

SV: What a good question. Well, I'm an only child, so imagining that relationship was something of a challenge. As an only child, if anything I tend to romanticize sibling relationships. But in imagining a real but strained relationship, I thought about a lot of friends I have whose sibling relationships are imperfect and how those relationships worked. Finally, I'm just someone who is interested in people and relationships and that's something I'm very sensitized to, perhaps also because I was an only child who grew up among adults, watching them relate to one another. Lena is a composite character, partially based on a great aunt I only knew from stories but who was ahead of her time as a nurse from the 20's onward who worked for Bell Telephone (as a nurse) but eventually volunteered and went to England as a WAC in World War II. But their relationship is also partially based on the relationship between my paternal grandmother and another great aunt who liked to criticize my grandmother's parenting. Most of my characters and relationships are not based on any one thing but are composites of a lot of people and relationships I know.

GD: Nicholas's napkin ring becomes symbolic in the novel for both Julia and Johannes, Julia's first son and Nicholas's older brother who was left with Julia in America. How did you choose a napkin ring to represent the loss of Nicholas?

SV: While buried deep in my research of German people between the wars as well as German immigrants, I discovered a lot about practices among these families, and somewhere along the line I learned that it was common for everyone to have their own napkin ring, often given as baby gifts like silver spoons or cup and plate sets. Then I started to think—what if Nicholas' napkin ring had been bought as a christening present but he'd never had a chance to use it? From there I started using Pinterest to actually research what traditional family napkin rings looked like. In the early 1900s they were actually quite ornate and I "chose" Nicholas' napkin ring from actual photos. From there it was easy to imagine Robert discovering it.

GD: In the 1940s chapters of the novel, Julia struggles to heal from her trauma with the help of her gentleman caller Paul Burns. Paul, too, understands loss. What were the challenges of bringing these two characters and their complicated pasts together?

SV: The challenges were bringing together these two middle-aged people who have been through a lot and not overdoing it. I tried to walk that line though I think I might have overstepped by a toe, occasionally. There are people that say Paul is too good to be true, but honestly, I thought that if Julia was going to trust anyone again, it would have to be someone like that, someone who did seem almost too good to be true. Otherwise, what would be the point? These are both people who are both reasonably happy on their own; there has to be a real spark between them to risk their individual happiness for happiness together. As much as she resists it, I think Julia realizes instinctively that Paul is a somewhat unusual person, especially compared to her first husband. Early on, she says she's never felt so listened to (by him) in all her life, which is not surprising since her only real experiences, in adulthood, are of Robert and Lena, who were both too self-centered to listen to her. She's hungry for the kind of real, sensitive attention she gets from Paul. And he is, I think, drawn to her because he sees her as different, as well as also an immigrant, like him. I believe too, that we can be very drawn to people who can heal us in some way, and they both instinctively perceive that potential in one another without being able to name it, at first.

GD: At the end of the novel, Johannes successfully finds Nicholas in Germany. However, theirs is not a happy ending. Is this the ending you always had in mind? Can you talk about this ending and the difficulty of writing endings?

SV: It's not exactly the ending I had in mind, but it's a compromise. It's hard to talk about the ending without giving away too much, but I wanted it to be satisfying without necessarily being perfectly happy. We are all forced to make meaning out of the things that happen to us, we are all in many ways an amalgamation of everything that has ever happened to us, good and bad, something that I think feels even more visceral during times of war or crisis—and this idea is something that Julia and Paul both have to come to terms with. In terms of writing endings, I want to resist tying everything up neatly but to come to some kind of resolution that also looks ahead in time. That is, I also wanted to try to connect to readers in the present, to show the ways in which we are all struggling to contend with and make sense of our lives whether it's during a horrific world war or a major pandemic shadowed by political strife and a climate crisis. I once read a memoir by Faye Moskowitz in which she talked about how, as a young wife and mother in the years after World War II,

she really struggled to find meaning in the world. I think young people today, people in general, can relate to that.

GD: In addition to being a novelist, you're a professor of creative writing at the University of Central Arkansas. How do you think teaching creative writing has affected your personal creative projects?

SV: The great effect that teaching creative writing has had on my creative projects is that I am constantly talking and thinking about writing as a craft and am often reminded to take my own advice or the advice I would give a student. In this way, teaching creative writing has definitely made me a better writer. Sometimes I'm so deeply immersed in a project it's hard to see where craft advice applies, but when I step back and help students apply that advice to their own work, I am able to see, hey, I can use this too.

GD: To conclude, the staff of *Gandy Dancer* would like to know what your future writing plans are. Are you currently working on any projects that you would like to tell us about?

SV: I've got a couple of things I'm working on. I'm finishing up a textbook on the teaching of creative writing that's due soon. And I've been working on a memoir spurred by almost losing my husband to a Sudden Cardiac Arrest last year. I've also been working on another novel on and off for the past several years that is the second part of a Queens triptych of which *The Lost Son* was the first book. Not a series, per se, but novels that also take place in Queens, during overlapping time periods with some overlapping minor characters. This second one, *Beautiful, Terrible Things* is a family saga that begins in Astoria with the aftermath of the sinking of the General Slocum in New York Harbor in 1904, resulting in the largest loss of life to hit New York City prior to 9/11, and ends in early 2004 (Julia's grandson is a major character, for example). I've written several traditional drafts of this novel but now I'm thinking about completely rewriting it as a novel in stories. With this novel, I've been overly bound to chronology, I think, and reworking it this way will give me more opportunity to experiment with narrative. In this way I've been very influenced by J. Ryan Stradahl's *Kitchens of the Great Midwest*, which does incredible things with interlocking/imaginatively scaffolded narratives. Your professor, Rachel Hall's collection, *Heirlooms*, has also been influential for me as another way to tell a larger story. After that, I have an idea for a third Queens novel that will cover the 60's through the 90's and will probably be the most personal, but that's way off in the distance. Trying to take my writing life, and life in general, one project, one day, at a time.