

Marnie Woodrow Q+A 2015

I think anyone who follows your career knows that you wear many hats. You are a bereavement counsellor, an editor, an avid cook—not to mention the big hat, the 30-gallon hat, which is author. How do you manage all that shifting and juggling?

I have a lot of energy and also no interest in sitting in a room alone 7 days a week. There's nothing to write about if one doesn't live. Plus, there's the practical reality of paying the bills and I like to shake up how that happens. I certainly don't write fiction for the money it brings in.

How much time does your counselling occupy?

I mostly give workshops, so it's completely up to me how often I do grief and bereavement work. Not surprisingly, my bereavement training comes in very handy with certain editorial jobs, especially memoirs. I've worked on some very intense personal material about grief issues.

I sent one of my friends to you to have his (first) book edited and he was very happy with the outcome. How much editing do you fit into your schedule?

I love editing. I see a lot of contempt on the part of some freelance editors when it comes to working with writers and I don't get it. It's a beautiful relationship when it works and that's a two-way street where respect is concerned. I edit one to two writers a month max in terms of bigger projects, and I coach weekly, never more than two or three writers at once. I like to enjoy what I'm doing and not resent it.

Let's talk about writing. When did you come out of the gate as a writer? And why short fiction?

I started off writing poetry, which was roundly rejected by all magazines and journals. I was about 20 when I started writing short fiction and that was the first writing I had published (next to my recipe for pork chops, printed in a newspaper when I was about 10). I still write short fiction and poetry. I get more excited about publishing poetry than I do prose, because to me it seems so much harder to break through in poetry. Whether or not I send my collection of poems out remains to be seen. I have also returned to playwriting in the past 2 years.

Do you prefer writing short fiction or novels?

Right now I'm in love with the novel form. The ideas that come just seem to require more breathing space and I'm also addicted to research and preparation, which novels seem to require. I have two full-length plays I'm resuming work on, but once this next novel takes hold in a bigger way, I'll turn

my focus to it till it's done. I don't ever want to spend a decade on one project again unless it is absolutely necessary.

What was your experience in publishing a first book? A second book?

My first book came out with a tiny Toronto press and it was a hand-numbered affair with lots of indie bookseller assistance. Handselling and word of mouth have always been important in my career. My second book was with a slightly larger press and that was fun, it got more attention, although again, as a very indie phenomenon. My third was with a huge house, Knopf, and that was also a thrill ride.

Are you still writing short fiction, and, if so, when will we see your next collection?

I wrote a third collection of short fiction that I plan to resume work on next year, but there are too many other projects on the front burner for now.

Spelling Mississippi came out in 2002. How was this book, which doesn't take place in Canada but in Louisiana, born?

It came of a passion for the topic of the Florence flood of 1966, and wondering who was there for that in their youth and a passion for New Orleans, city of beautiful, insane, lovely people. I stayed there for a few months in my early 20s and there was a real woman who tried to cross the Mississippi, and it made me wonder what she planned to do when she got to the other side, had she made it before the Coast Guard yanked her out of the water.

SM is a lesbian novel. At the time it came out, lesbian work was barely moving in towards the centre from the fringe. What has been your reception as a lesbian author?

It's interesting to think of this now, because at the time Knopf didn't treat it as a lesbian novel, but as literary fiction, part of their New Face of Fiction campaign, with little focus on who the lovers were in the story. So I think I found a lot of non-lesbian AND lesbian readers that way. I'm an out and proud writer, but I never actually envision my work as lesbian, although it almost always is, character-wise, I suppose. Except for the next one I just started, and who knows what that will end up being...

What has it been like to be a queer author in Canada? Do you think it has altered your career or opportunities?

I'm told often that there is a lavender ceiling, a limit to how much acceptance any queer writer will ever get here, and I suppose it all depends on what a writer is looking for from her career. I mean, it's never been a goal of mine to be a household name or to be invited to the right party. I

want to be read widely, if possible, but the quality of the writing should be what draws people to a book. I don't read exclusively queer authors and I think it's important to branch out in all directions whether with what we read or what we write.

Do you have advice for young queer writers considering careers?

Read more than you write, read more than you blog, write often and with your own voice and it will happen. Talent cannot be suppressed. Discipline is more important than fifteen seconds of internet fame.

Now that SM is all wrapped up, and it's behind you, are there things that you would do differently? Were you happy with the outcome?

I would have enjoyed myself more instead of worrying so deeply about book sales. I was paid a lot of money for SM and I took the pressure to heart quite intensely. But I was also thrilled with the experiences I had (festivals and readings) and the people I met through researching and publishing it. And the team at Knopf was wonderful, I got to work with one of the best editors in the country at the time, Diane Martin.

Do you have specific thoughts about publishing, about the changes in publishing since you brought out your first book in 1991?

I think that social media is a huge help to emerging writers in some ways, and certainly Can Lit has a huge profile now, much bigger than it had in '91. It's still a hard go that isn't for the faint of heart. I once had a student ask me what he could expect for a salary in fiction writing and I had to work really hard not to laugh. Salary? I wish!

What is the best part of being a writer for you?

Having an outlet for my insatiable curiosity and justification for talking to myself, a lifelong only-child habit. Also, I love reading and well, one has to read voraciously if one is going to write anything decent.

What is the most challenging part?

Keeping the faith some days. Ass in chair on a sunny day is also hard.

I know you have a new novel due out this fall (2015). Can you tell us a little about that book and how it came to be?

Heyday is the name of my new novel, and it's a parallel love story set in 1909 and the 21st century. It came of my love for rollercoasters and Toronto Island then and now and my personal questions about reincarnation and grief.

I would be more than happy if you wanted to add any Q+A's yourself. We often don't get asked the questions we'd really like to answer so that would be just fine.

Is there a story or a fragment of prose that I could share on my blog? If so, could you send it with your answers, please, along with anything you might like to say about it?

Excerpt from the opening pages of *Heyday*:

We met after the man Ferris invented his wheel and before time-share villas on Mars. It was hot for June. You came dashing down the ramp of life, all boots and hope. In the sun we made promises, plans to conquer the world outside the one we'd had named for us. We designed a wild world of cotton candy dreams and cold drinks and always the decision of whether to spin or coast, soar skyward or rush downward. Do both, you tell me now. And when night comes, autumn—keep your promises, no matter what.

That one day the carbon stench of scorched wood and charred canvas drifted over the harbour. Silver tendrils of smoke rose still from the devoured skeletons of roller coasters. Before even reaching shore I could see and smell the destruction. It was necessary to shut my ears to the comments of gawkers riding the ferry, out for a last good look at the fall-out of a wayward spark in a wooden kingdom. Our world. Their heartless curiosity was nearly unbearable. Talk of insurance and arson and none of it mattered till I clapped eyes on you again and knew that another girl had been taken away from someone else.

She was the healthy one, everyone said. If anything, I should have been the one to get cancer. Me with my long love affair with cigarettes, my big fat appetite for everything decadent and bad for you. And then there was my dishonest heart, loving elsewhere but with cowardice. Loving you through time. You must be this tall to ride this ride...

We'll go to Coney Island, it won't matter. No crying. Girls died every day. Not mine.

[Marnie Woodrow](#) (born 1969 in Orillia, ON) is a Canadian writer and editor. She has also worked as a researcher/writer for TV and radio.

Woodrow has published two short fiction collections, *Why We Close Our Eyes When We Kiss* in 1991 and *In the Spice House* in 1996, and the novel *Spelling Mississippi* in 2002. Her second novel, "Heyday" is slated for Fall 2015 publication in Canada with Tightrope Books. A recent popular writing instructor at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies, she won an Excellence In Teaching Award in 2005.

Spelling Mississippi was short-listed for the Amazon.ca First Novel Award in 2003.

Woodrow has also been a columnist for *Xtra!*, Toronto's gay and lesbian biweekly newspaper. Her occasional journalism, essays, stories and poetry have appeared in numerous publications including *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *CV2*, *Write*, *NOW*, *eye weekly* and *This Magazine*.

A former resident of Toronto, Ontario, she now resides in Hamilton, Ontario where she teaches Creative Writing at an independent bookstore and online. -from Wikipedia