



AN INTERVIEW WITH

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Winner of the G.S. Sharat Chandra Prize for Short Fiction
Selected by Marly Swick

AUTHOR OF

Tea & other
Ayama Na
Tales

Interview by
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You've lived on both American coasts and in Paris and traveled quite a bit. Which Asian countries have you visited and what about them struck you as material for your fiction?

I traveled to Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Ultimately, what struck me most was the will to thrive.

Even in Cambodia, where the insane Pol Pot had systematically eliminated the country's artists and intellectuals, there was this incredible resourcefulness and drive. Young dance troops in Siem Reap, for example, were reviving their cultural heritage by studying the engravings of dancers on the walls of the ancient temples. At the same time, the shelves of the city's only library were nearly bare of books. The incredible desire of people to flourish regardless of circumstances stimulated me to imagine their inner lives.

Ayama Na is what I imagined.

When you decided to write about Ayama Na, your invented country, did all the stories come at once? Were any inspired by experiences at home?

The stories were written over a number of years, and yes, some were set in motion by real events at home. But all of them moved quickly into the reality of Ayama Na.

"The Artist's Story" was inspired by a French

Canadian artist I met in a San Diego homeless shelter who was fighting bureaucratic roadblocks so he could paint in city streets and parks. "AIBO or Love at First Sight" was inspired by my attraction to anthropomorphized robots. At a local mall, watching a demo of AIBO, Sony's robot pet, I was immediately smitten. I didn't buy one, but I was hoping it would follow me home. And I guess it did, in the guise of fiction.

Other stories reflect the seriocomic experiences all of us share, no matter where we live.

The tension between tradition and progress is a theme running through the entire book. that seems to get pulled in both directions with equal chances for a positive outcome at either end. This takes place at a scale anywhere from individual families, tribes, to the entire country of Ayama Na as the western world moves in. Did you consciously work in this theme?

In countries like Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia, there is so much tension between tradition and progress, you can't help but be conscious of it. You breathe it in with the air.

On a subtler level, to paraphrase the philosophers: You cannot wash in the same river twice. I'm aware of this theme in my own life. Like many other people, I think, I'm trying to decide, almost on a daily basis, which traditions, thoughts, memories, and opinions should remain, and which should roll out with the tide.

In *Ayama Na*, as you say, there are opportunities for happiness in either direction—progress or tradition. But as Pania sees at the end of the title story, you don't necessarily have to choose one or the other; there are opportunities in the middle way.

Your stories take place in settings across the whole social spectrum of Ayama Na, but even the stories of those in the worst shape kept a hopeful note to the end. How did you get such a close look at other cultures? Did you see evidence of this sort of hope in your travels?

In Singapore, I met a young bookkeeper by chance out on the street and we had lunch together. Rachel had been advised by a fortune teller to lose weight and apply for a job as a flight attendant. Although she'd never flown on a plane in her life, she'd been accepted into the training program as a flight attendant for Cathay Pacific Airlines. About ten months later, she phoned me from a stopover at L.A.X.

So yes, I saw some evidence of hope and success. And in *Ayama Na* there are many happy endings because I prefer it that way. In real life, I've so often wished I had a magic wand that worked off the page.

Was the fortune teller who advised the bookkeeper to become a flight attendant the inspiration for the fortune teller in "North of the Faro?"

Well, yes! Rachel took me to see her fortune teller and served as translator from Chinese to English and the reverse. Like Rianna in "North of the Faro," this fortune teller worked at a card table on a street of fortune tellers—sat there changing peoples' lives. She read my palm and told me, among other things, that my son would turn out well and support me in my old age. (Dan, are you listening?) She also predicted I'd publish books! (She didn't mention the Chandra Prize.)

Teenagers and adolescents figure prominently in several stories—"Tea," "Hamburger Wars," and "A Ruined World" come to mind. You seem to like writing about adolescents. Where does this come from?

I taught public school for a number of years and currently I work with foster children—10 to 16 year olds. Kids this age might be clueless about the underlying dynamic of their own personalities and blind to their own flaws, but they are brilliant about yours. It's fascinating.

In stories like "Tea" and "North of the Faro" spirituality plays a major role. Like everything else in Ayama Na, you've invented convincing religious and spiritual ideas. Have you done any study into eastern or western religion?

No formal study. I read, though. And I have practiced meditation.

I imagine readers of your book might want to know at what point you decided to use the setting of a fictional country to tell your stories and why?

After living in France for more than a year, my language skills were still abysmal and my cultural references so poor I couldn't understand a joke (or a teenager) to save my life. My understanding is that it takes an adult about eleven years to become fluent in the language and culture of a new country. Since my travels in southeast Asia weren't lengthy, I knew how much I didn't know. On the other hand, I am the world's expert on *Ayama Na*. Everything I write about it is one hundred percent true. Insert smile emoticon here.

Who are some writers who have influenced you?

I'm guessing I've been influenced by every writer I've ever read, but I can tell you some of the ones

I love and admire. In no particular order: Margaret Drabble. Phillip Roth. (I have more than once thought that if the best sentence I write is as good as his worst, I'll be satisfied.) Haruki Murakami. Michael Chabon. Hemingway. Ozick. Paulo Coelho for his purity and sincerity. And then there is Jane Austen. I've lost track of the number of times I've read my trusty old copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. I go to it as if it were a self-help book. For consolation, it's on a par with chocolate and "Law and Order" reruns.

What are you planning to write next?

I'm in the middle of a novel about a young vinyl repairman who's trying to figure out how to live a good life. I'm also attempting to peddle a brilliant and absolutely fascinating novel about an evil linguist. Bidding war, anyone?

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—Eleanor Bluestein