

An Interview with Marilyn Kallet

author of *Circe, After Hours*

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Interviewed by Elizabeth Smith

Q. As a poet, an editor of both poetry and essays, and a teacher of creative writing, you are involved with writing in different ways. What do you enjoy about each, and do you find any difficulties in doing all three?

A. Your question gets me thinking about the juggling act that is my life. Writing and teaching are tremendously important to me. Up until last year, I also directed the creative writing program at UT (the University of Tennessee)—17 years!—and I’m a wife and mother, so that’s another aspect of a busy and fulfilling life.

When I’m teaching, I’m fully present for the students. It’s all about them. But on breaks and on sabbaticals, and in summer, I go to artist colonies where I am no one’s teacher or mother, just a poet trying to make the words come forth as song. And I’ve been doing that so long—going to artist colonies—that my body even understands the shift. I start writing on the way to the Virginia Center. Poems come to me in the car!

I did a book on this subject called *Sleeping With One Eye Open: Women Writers and the Art of Survival*, University of Georgia Press, co-edited with Judith Ortiz Cofer. Women writers are amazing!

I have a new book coming out in August, *The Art of College Teaching: 28 Takes*, co-edited with my colleague in poli- sci, April Morgan. It has wonderful essays by various award-winning profs. But the best thing about it is the satirical cartoons! All of us who teach make mistakes in the classroom. The one thing that unites all of the teachers is a willingness to admit the mistakes and use them as models for learning.

The book is from UT Press. Though I seemed to make a sharp division between teaching and poetry writing—and I feel that division—I’m also keenly aware that the University has nurtured my work from the get-go. Not just by paying my salary, but by sending me on leaves, paying for my research and travel, and so on. I’ve been a lucky poetry duck!

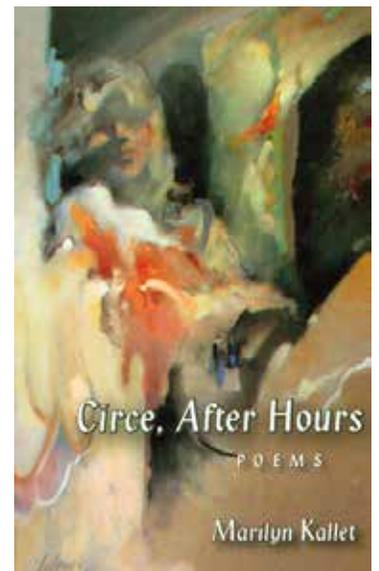
I have a reading at UT coming up in February, and another in Knoxville in April. Who will make up the audience? Other writers, my friends, and my students. They are supportive to me and my work—so the energy comes around.

As for the positive aspects of writing poetry, I wrote an essay for *Sleeping With One Eye Open*, which began: “Poetry began me, gave me a place where I could imagine and shape my life, my voice, my way of being both in language and in the world.” That’s still true!

Q. You often perform your work in coffee shops and other places. Do you write your words to be spoken aloud?

A. I perform my poetry a lot, not so much in coffee houses, but in theatres, in shows. My coach last year was a terrific actor and director, Kali Miester. She taught me how to breathe, use my voice more fully, and how to deliver lines. So I try to bring performance skills to the written word.

Some poems I write for the stage. Others are more subtle, and written for the page. Sometimes a poem will work for



both venues. “No Makeup,” which has become a signature poem, is one of those that can cross over. I don’t perform the Holocaust poems, since that would be simply inappropriate. They require an atmosphere of respect, a silence before and after them.

Q. Your new book is called Circe, After Hours – why this title?

A. Initially, we were going to call the book *Lure*. But a few weeks before time to enter the ISBN number, we learned that another poetry book published in Kansas City was called *Lure*. I was crushed for about an hour, then started to brainstorm other titles. I made long lists of terrible titles. After a week or so of this, while I was out running, the title *Circe, After Hours* came to me clearly, as if it was being broadcast on my street for my benefit. The other title that was a runner-up was *Nightingale Still Burning*. But that was too “poetic,” a tad pretentious.

Where did Circe come from? As part of a poem-a-day exercise, I wrote poems from the point of view of Circe, obsessing about Odysseus and the role she’d been given, of turning men into pigs. She turned out to be a wise-cracking older woman with straightforward diction, a love for good single malt scotch, and a good ear. A little past her prime, perhaps, she was like a blues singer whose voice still had the lure of the ocean to it for Odysseus’s men. Once, she thought she had all the power—but Odysseus had the real tidal pull. Doesn’t love knock us out like that?

Many of the poems in this collection are love poems, some of them are about being a woman over 50, some of them are about taboo subjects (those crushes on younger men!), some are about global subjects, racism, anti-Semitism—about a culture in Nazi Germany that was more wolf than pig, blowing down houses, burning down people, including some of my family. A real-life heroine emerges, Hedwig Schwarz, the survivor.

So the book goes from light banter and blues to real, historical misery and reflection on art’s power and the strengths of family and religion. The early poems lure the reader in (“lure” again!), and hope to keep them until the final, more difficult song.

Q. In the last section of your book you take scraps of information about your relatives— survivors and victims of the Holocaust—and build pictures of their lives. In a way this is also how your poetry works; would you agree?

A. The poems about the Holocaust are different than those about me and my life, in that I had to do a lot of research to get the facts. Archival research, travel to Germany, interviews. Then, having walked those ancestral streets, having seen the camp, the cells, the grey, I could begin to try and open myself to the stories my relatives might have wanted to tell. Hedwig, the survivor, was the one whose story I was obsessed with. I tried to let her speak. Can’t know what she would have thought—though recently I heard from an eighty year- old survivor from Horb. He is a relative, and he sent me a picture of Hedwig. She looked a bit like Garbo, in her hospital bed. On the hospital counter near the bed was a picture of her daughter Sally and her grandson Freddie, about whom I wrote in “To My Poem of Hope.” And I knew that I had gotten at least some of the story right!

The poet is a medium when things are going right.

Q. In “Great Poet” you criticize the way you used to write: “I was a great poet, composed, understated, subdued. / Never let personality leak / into a syllable” until, “My psyche spilled over / like a fleshy spare tire . . . I let go.” What is “great poetry” for you?

A. “Great Poet” is a spoof—it makes gentle fun of poets who are so tidy that no warmth, no human messiness comes through. Poetry requires risk and personality to have impact. I never was an ice queen in my poetry—this poem lets me play against that impossible, annoying model. As for “great poet” syndrome, I’ve never written the “immaculate conception” kind of poem. From the time I started writing to now, I’ve always invested my whole self in the work, including what Wordsworth called “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions”—definitely not a marble statue! Verbal proof of a life intensely lived. On the other hand, the poems are seriously composed and may go through a hundred drafts, even the short poems.

Q. Your poems in this book include many of your own memories. In a poem about identity you write, “If I have to give up memory . . . where will I be?” How important, do you think, is the connection between memory and identity, and how does poetry fit in?

A. Poetry is a flexible instrument for experiencing the world in a sonorous and reflective way. It adds new layers to what we have felt and seen. Its lines remember, bear witness, and hold the poet and the reader responsible for the world we live in. “Beauty is twice beauty,” Pablo Neruda said about his pretty useful new socks, but he meant poetry too; where we sing, who we are. In “Where Identity Doesn’t Rest,” the poet entertains a dialogue between traditional narrative, with its personal history, and experimental poetry, which is more interested in formal innovation than in hearing the same old song. Aesthetic tension like this can be scary—the poem is “on edge,” hopefully in a good way. This poem was influenced by the best experimental poet I know, Brenda Hillman.

Q. You have said of your poetry, “When I walk through the fields or through the suburbs of my neighborhood the poems are whispering to me.” Could you explain how you find poetry from your surroundings, and how poetry helps “weave” you “into the landscape and daily life” of a place?

A. East Tennessee is very beautiful, lush and green, green, green! I walk or run every morning, and as I physically make my way through my neighborhood, poems come into my head. The rhythm of walking is particularly conducive to poems. Sometimes I memorize poetry by walking with the poems.

Our language for poetic processes is not very precise—we speak of “internal/external.” But how poems actually come to be is a lot more obscure and unified. There’s an interaction between self and the natural world that poets have long acknowledged, honored, and respected. After one has written poems about a place, one feels more closely tied to the place. There’s a feeling of kinship, recognition, and emotional investment.

When I see the lake at Mount St. Francis, for example, I’m seeing trees and deep water, but also years of poetry, years of mystery. The natural environment is not “used up” by poetry—it keeps yielding and resisting, faithful to its own secrets.

This interaction with the natural world, and with place in general, makes me an inheritor of the Romantic tradition, with an edgy urban flavor, an awareness of the damage that we have done to the environment.

A poet is nowhere without “place.”

Q. In this book, language and words take many forms: comforting, dangerous, a means of bringing people together, an obstacle. Is language something you enjoy exploring through your work?

A. I thoroughly enjoy working with language. I’m enthralled by what words can do, how wild or sonorous they can be. How they have a life of their own!



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