



## An Interview with Stephanie Powell Watts

author of



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Interview by Karen I. Johnson

*Q: One of the most unusual settings for a story is in a dog registry call center helping dog owners fill out papers to register their dogs. Sheila, one of 16 operators, wonders if she is “actually managing or laying down decorative pavers on the way to crazy.” I know you have been a fast-food worker and worked on a shoestring factory line, but how would you describe the inspiration for this story?*

*A:* When I was a very young woman I worked at the American Kennel Club dog registry in Cary, North Carolina. At first, I answered phones from mostly annoyed dog owners and later I wrote letters to distressed dog owners. I have never really owned a dog in my life. Stray dogs would occasionally find themselves at our house in Lenoir, North Carolina, and we called them our own until they found better accommodations, but we never went out of our way to own and take care of a dog. I was fascinated with the dog owners I communicated with at the registry.

Some just wanted to breed their animals for profit, but many, many of them truly loved their dogs. The dogs were family members who got special food and fancy clothes and daycare and funerals when they died. Because I was young or stupid or just ignorant of the world, I first made fun of those people and their silly

devotion. It was years later before I really understood how important it is to love somebody, even a furry body, that will—without question or reservation—love you back.

*Q: You grew up in North Carolina, and your stories are set in the South. You have said about your home state that there is something fascinating about the place and the tight-rope walking you have to do. You’ve also said that people make lots of assumptions about Southerners. Do your characters walk any of those tightropes or confront any of those assumptions?*

My characters are mostly trying to figure out their places in the world and they are treading lightly, afraid of making too many mistakes they can’t come back from easily. My characters are dirt-rovers usually, working class, uneducated, but smart and hoping to get smarter. I hope that the characters are not easily pigeon-holed. I hope that I have created characters that are life-like enough that they aren’t dismissed as stereotypes. I have no doubt that many will come to my stories and assume that they know all about the women they encounter. I hope those readers will be surprised at the complexity of the black, Southerner experience. I would love for that to happen.



*Q: I have read that authors who belong to a minority group often are expected to write as a representative of their race, religion or other group. As a writer with a background as an African American, a Southerner, a Jehovah's Witness, a woman, do you sense such an expectation, and if so, how do you address it?*

*A: I can't think about being the black, female, Southern or good fill-in-the-blank whatever while I'm writing my stories. As much as I can, I try to turn off the editor and stuff her in the closet until I've got a respectable draft. I'd be lying if I said I don't think about representation. I'm not sure it is possible to be a public person and not think about from whom and where you come. I don't want to embarrass or upset my family (biological and otherwise). But, you know, I've tried to let all that identity politics stuff go some and be a writer first. A Muslim-raised, Indian friend of mine won a contest and had a story published that featured a modern woman talking to a man in a bar. The woman in the story didn't use dirty language or sleep with the man or even present herself as loosey-goosey, but my friend lived in fear that someone in her family back home might come across the story and be shocked and disappointed. My friend was ashamed that the story would reflect poorly on her family and on the current state of her own moral and ethical life. My friend was so disturbed about possible exposure that she gave up writing. I think she probably did the right thing. I don't know if everyone sees the choice as starkly as I do, but I think writers of color (I hate that term), women writers, Southerners, any and every one who just by being alive represent a minority or oppressed group have to make a decision. Either you will be a writer and try to present the world in all its flawed complexity or you will stop writing anything more substantive than holiday cards or snazzy e-mails. I am not pretending that this realization came easy for me. I'm also very appreciative and aware that my generation of African American writers might be the first to not have the burden of representation cloud over their every word.*

*Q: The story "Unassigned Territory" won a prestigious Pushcart Prize in 2007 and was selected for the 2007 issue of Best American Short Stories and other honors. It's a*

*wonderfully told story about two Jehovah's Witnesses, one white and one black, preaching door to door in a very rural area of the South. Any readers who have ever been called on by the Jehovah's Witnesses may find their reactions described in Stephanie's humorous field service notes. How did you come to write about Jehovah's Witnesses and how do you approach writing about faith in fiction? What is your relationship to the Stephanie in that story? Are those your actual field-service notes about the calls?*

*A: When I was a new Jehovah's Witness I was nervous to go door to door for reasons you might expect: fear of rejection, embarrassment, the icky feeling that I was intruding on other people's lives. It is very hard to go somewhere you know in advance that you are not wanted.*

*As I kept preaching, I became afraid that I would never find someone to join me in the faith. This was a crucial turn in my development as a minister at a crucial time of my life (when I was in my late teen years). I miss those days. Faith is a wonderful feeling, by definition magical, but not illogical. If true science is about what empirical data demonstrates then faith is the best science. What I mean is if you are a person of faith, you see every day, every hour, in every action, reaction, loved one or world event the hand of God. You see with your own eyes God's intervention in every little thing.*

*There is nothing like that feeling, no substitute, not much comes close. It is a tragedy to lose faith. Once I started to fall away from the faith, I started to search for ways out into another self. I wouldn't have described it as that way then, but I see the signs now. Every thing, idea, and belief seemed wrong; every believer hypocritical and arrogant. The Stephanie in the story is not the Stephanie I was at her age. Her feelings and attitudes took me years to cultivate—an accumulation of feeling, rather than a fiery-tongue conversion.*

*Q: The characters in your stories show great strength in the face of difficult situations. Many of them are in their*

teens. Has writing about these characters brought you closer to the source of their strength in these stories?

A: I love all of my good-girl characters. In celebrity culture and in what is our real life the bad girls get all the press. Everyone talks about the bad girls with so much venom and thinly disguised good old-fashioned jealousy. I don't always agree with my characters' choices, since so often they can't figure out what to do and they wait and wait and wait. But these kids have hope. This time period of life fascinates me. Stuff that would break the back of a 45-year-old, a 15-year-old can endure. The kid still believes. I have to remind myself to believe every day.

Q: You established the creative writing classes at Lehigh University where you teach. In connection with your teaching, you have said that most writers have big questions and their most important job is to find out what their questions are. What are some of your questions?

A: How do people live without faith? What keeps you moving in the world?

What makes it all worth it?

Can you ever get over your family? I have now lived with my husband longer than I lived with my parents and brothers. That earlier family life has long been reassessed and reworked and retold by all of our faulty memories. That past isn't even real any more. So, if time is not the answer, how can a body break that familial gravitational pull?

Q: Your story "All the Sad Etc." deals with mental illness. I understand you are working on a nonfiction project on this topic. Tell us about that project and where it stands?

A: I am working on a book of essays about mental illness surrounding a murder that happened in a black community in North Carolina. The killer was an admitted would-be family annihilator, thank god his children weren't home, who succeeded in killing his young wife. The community didn't ignore the signs of his illness that were everywhere: his rantings

in the street, his spray painted trailer, his dressing in women's clothes. The community refused to believe what they saw. The man's black friends, neighbors, loved ones thought he'd straighten up or get over it or settle down with age.

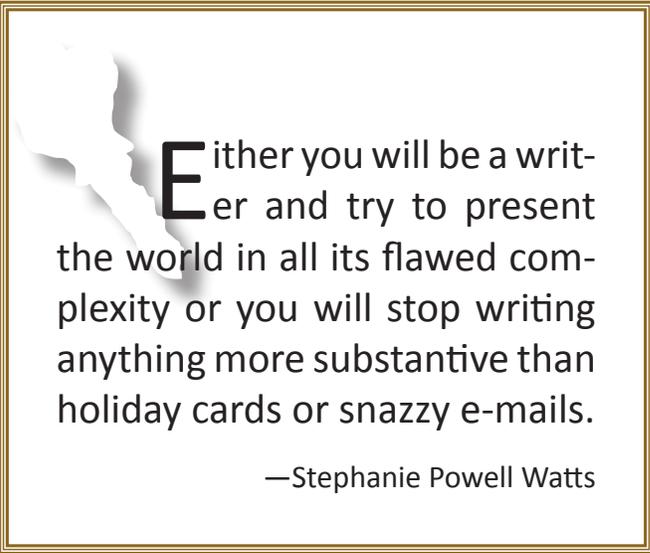
They refused to accept that he was sick. I want to know why.

You have been compared to Charles Dickens for his portrayal of the comic and the grotesque and Toni Morrison for her lyricism and intelligence. That's quite a duo. What thoughts or feelings does this bring to mind?

I love whoever the people are who made those statements, but they have clearly not been responding to treatment.

Q: Please name some of your favorite authors and what about their work you admire.

A: If President Obama asked for my advice of what to read during his leisure I would send him Edward Jones' *Lost in the City*. Hands down, one of the best books of the past decade. The stories in the collection about real people trying to make a way will break your heart and make you say *Lord, please have mercy on me and all the characters of the world*. I don't know how I survived the reading to tell about it. I would also send my book because I just couldn't stand it, but I'd send his first.



Either you will be a writer and try to present the world in all its flawed complexity or you will stop writing anything more substantive than holiday cards or snazzy e-mails.

—Stephanie Powell Watts