

I met Rebecca McClanahan on Facebook. I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting her in person. I saw the cover of her new memoir in essays: *In the Key of New York City*, and because I'm starting to get braver at reaching out to people I want to know, I messaged her and asked for an ARC. We started chatting and found out that we had more than New York City in common (my mother was born in Brooklyn and New York figures prominently in my life), but we also had colon cancer in common. I devoured the ARC of the book in one night. I could imagine myself with her in her apartment trying to capture a squirrel that had gotten in the house two days before the Towers fell. I was with her during her surgery. I walked the streets with her in the aftermath of 9/11. She brings a poet's eye to the essay. Each piece weaves seamlessly into the next, creating a tapestry of experiences that together form the arc of a woman searching for home.

I'm so excited to elevate Rebecca's work here. Please go buy her new book! **To make it even more tempting to pre-order, all royalties from the book are being donated to food banks!** The book releases on Tuesday, September 1. [Order now!](#)

**LH: What issues/ideas/questions do you find continue to circle through your work?**

RM: A wonderful question for any writer. I've thought about this a lot over the past few years as it's become more and more clear to me that throughout my decades of writing in various genres—poetry, fiction, essays, nonfiction, memoir, hybrid forms—I have always been drawn to the question “Where do I leave off and others begin?” Seems I've always been obsessed with the myriad ways that people connect—in family relationships, love and marriage, neighborhoods, communities. To what extent we are responsible for, and to, those forces that formed us? After all, our lives did not begin with our births and will not end with our deaths. But you know this already, Laraine, as your forthcoming book about “a constellation of ghosts” suggests.

**LH: How do you engage with literary citizenship and its role in building a community of supportive writers?**

RM: Touching again on “a constellation of ghosts,” I'll begin with what I feel is a basic though perhaps underrated tenet of literary citizenship: honoring those writers who have gone before us, who have planted seeds that sprout, sometimes decades or centuries later, in our own work. These writers are part of my community and I don't want their words to die. One way I try to keep their words alive is by memorizing poems and prose excerpts and reciting them in classes and workshops. This is also a way to touch their works as directly—and physically—as I can. To *commune* with them. As for supporting contemporary writers, I subscribe to several literary journals, buy as many books as I can, read and respond to manuscripts, and try to champion the work of new writers as well as new writing by established writers. But I'm sure I fall short, as there is so much exciting work to read and learn from.

**LH: Self-promotion is a necessary task in today's marketplace. How do you approach self-promotion and have your views changed on it over time?**

RM: Yes, it is a necessary task. But I feel it is unfortunate that writers feel such pressure to sell themselves and their work. (I joke with my husband that whenever I need to post something on Facebook, I feel the need for a Xanax—though I've never taken one, ha!) Of course self-promotion by writers is not a new phenomenon. Walt Whitman was an eager self-promoter; he even reviewed his own books. But for me, and I presume for many other writers as well, the

writing itself is what matters, and the marketplace part—for me at least—is but a necessary evil. I'd rather be spending my time writing the next essay or book. That's where the joy resides—in the making!

**LH: There are so many extreme crises in the world today demanding our attention. Often, we hear push-back from others about how art doesn't matter or isn't worth the time of the artist or the receiver. What is your answer to those who say art is a waste of time?**

RM: This makes me think of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's amazing book, *Teacher*, about her decades-long experience working with Maori children in New Zealand. She concludes that there are two vents from which energy can flow: the destructive or the creative. Energy, she says, must go somewhere. When the vent for art was activated in her students—through writing, painting, drawing, singing—the destructive vent seemed to atrophy. Having worked for over fifteen years with children myself—in the Poetry-in-the-Schools program—I have to agree with her. The arts are not frills. They are as necessary as breathing. The arts speak to the universal, to what touches us all—our fears, dreams, nightmares, and hopes. The arts allow us to connect the disparate parts of ourselves, to think divergently and originally, and to reach across the spaces that divide us. They are crucial to our survival as a human family. Or, as a second grader in one of my classes wrote, “A poet needs some paper and a pencil. But most of all, he needs a sense of human.”

**LH: What metaphor best expresses your creative process?**

RM: Oh my, what a great question. And “creative process” is a great phrase, too, suggesting that the process itself is creative, not necessarily the artist. The process itself teaches us what our work wants and needs to become. We follow that process, word by word, sentence by sentence, often without any intention or preconceived notion. In that way, maybe we are like those tunnel diggers or spelunkers who strap a light to their foreheads and squirm, sometimes on their bellies, through the darkness until they finally break through to some light. Well, that's one metaphor that occurs to me. Another metaphor is weaving, quilting, trying to discover what one of Henry James's characters calls the “the figure in the carpet,” the design that is woven into even the most everyday events.

**LH: What are you currently working on and why does it matter to you?**

RM: About seven years ago, my husband and I began a journey of caregiving for my parents, and it changed me—and continues to change me—in deep and dramatic ways. Almost from the beginning of the journey, even in the midst of the most harrowing events, I started writing—as a form of desperate prayer, perhaps, and as a way to get perspective, to try to see my parents and myself as characters in an ongoing, universal drama. I'm calling these pieces “caregrieving” essays. I imagine that, as in *In the Key of New York City*, the finished book (if I finish it before it finishes me!) will be a mix of short and long essays with perhaps some poems sprinkled in. It's too soon to tell. I guess I have to do what I've done before: trust the process, strap on that miner's headlamp, and keep digging.